

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG™

And The Silicon Warriors



MARTIN ADAMS

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THE
HEDGEHOG
AND
THE SILICON
WARRIORS
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THE SONIC STORY SO FAR

There was a time when Mobius was a peaceful world. And the Green Hill Zone was the most peaceful and pleasant and generally all-round cool place to hang out on the entire planet.

Mobius's inhabitants were, and are, talking animals of all types. The hippest, streetwise dude of all was, and is, a hedgehog named Sonic.

And of course it just had to be Sonic who stumbled into the laboratory of Mobius's only human, the kindly but absent-minded Doctor Kintobor.

Dr K was perfecting a device — the Retro-Orbital Chaos Compressor — to attract all the evil on Mobius and contain it within six emeralds he called the Chaos Emeralds (neat name, Doc). He found the time to help boost Sonic's already radically fast footwork, too, and with the help of a special pair of drop-dead cool red trainers, Sonic exceeded the speed of sound. And he turned blue, of course.

Sonic superspeeded all over Mobius, searching for the Grey Emerald that would neutralise the evil contained in the Chaos Emeralds. But before he found it, Doctor Kintobor's absent-mindedness brought disaster to the whole planet as he entered faulty data into the ROCC. The device exploded, releasing the Emeralds, scattering protective golden rings across the length and breadth of Mobius, and transmogrifying Kintobor into his exact opposite: the evil, power-crazed, obese and egg-loving Doctor Robotnik.

Robotnik's influence reached across the entire planet. Once-verdant landscapes were transformed into polluted wastelands. The evil Doctor's robots scoured the land for animals to imprison, and in particular for the one super-fast hedgehog who has the power to foil his plans — Sonic.

And Sonic has foiled Robotnik's plans — at least twice, by the time you read this book. But Robotnik is ineggshaustibly, eggasperatingly resilient. Once again, he's back. And that means trouble for Mobius in general, and for hedgehogs with red trainers in particular.



ENTER

It was a dark and stormy night.

Neither moon nor stars penetrated the thick clouds that wallpapered the sky and poured raindrops the size of gobstoppers down to splatter solidly against the hard and cracked ground, parched and thirsty after a long, hot summer. The air was cold but fresh, filled with the sound of the rain as it tore through leaves and grass, splashed on rocks and stones, dripped from branches and gurgled as it ran into new streams, seeking out the lowest parts of the ground in which to make puddles and pools. Let's face it, it was not a night when anyone sensible or sane would want to be anywhere outside the warm comfort of their homes.

Through the tempest skipped a single figure, splashing from puddle to puddle. From time to time a ragged stroke of lightning pierced the sky above, throwing light across the heavens, making the clouds look like boiling oceans of grey-black mud and casting long, fat shadows around the figure on the ground. His clothes — a red shirt and black trousers — were damp and slick from the pelting rainwater, and clung to his bulbous body. The shirt barely covered his fat egg-like torso and stomach, while the trousers flapped damply around his thin legs. Rain splashed on to his bald head, running down his nose and into his soaked orange moustache. Over the rumble of the thunder his voice boomed and roared.

‘Ha ha ha ha ha!’ he boomed. ‘Ha ha ha ha! What a beautiful night for tyranny and villainy! At last, I, Doctor Ivo Robotnik, noted supergenius and erinacophobe — for it is I! — can test my final, ultimate and greatest plan without being observed and stopped by that prickled blue pest and his idiot companion! Ha! And if it works, planet Mobius will finally be mine, and I shall be emperor of everything! Mad, they called me! Mad! Mad! Ha ha ha ha ha!’

A scar of lightning flickered across the sky and the hysterical genius glanced up. ‘Time to test!’ he roared, and the thunder roared back in answer. He pulled a small black box from his pocket, tapped a couple of numbers into the small keypad on it and pressed a large red button. For a second nothing happened and then, as rain pelted down on to the mad

doctor's expectant face, a tiny point of red, green and blue light appeared in front of him, floating a metre above the ground. It hovered there, spinning, in the middle of the downpour, and then began to expand in size. In seconds it had grown into a red column topped with a flash of white, with blurred edges and fuzzy details, standing taller than Robotnik. For a moment longer the raindrops passed right through it, then as it crackled and a line of white electricity ran over its outline, pulling the fuzziness into sharp relief, they began to splash against its solidified body.

The white line rose upwards, passed over the figure's head and disappeared. In front of Robotnik stood a young man, heavy muscles bulging beneath his red karate suit. A mop of thick blond hair stood out on top of his head, but the rain was already beginning to slick it down over his scalp. His whole body moved as he breathed hard, staring fixedly at the bald scientist in front of him. His whole body glowed slightly, as if it were filled with a strange electricity.

‘It works! My beautiful device works! Ha ha ha!’ crowed Robotnik, staring at the young man. ‘They’ll never call me mad again, not after my wonderful machine has sliced and diced and dragon-kicked them into pieces! So, my little road-warrior, are you ready for action?’

He gazed adoringly at the rain-slicked figure before him. The figure stared back with a rather less friendly expression, then took a step forward and dropped into a fighting crouch, and from that into a well-trained attack stance. Raindrops exploded against its back in little sparks.

‘No! No!’ yelled Robotnik, moving backwards away from the glowing figure he had created. ‘Not me! You don’t attack me, you idiot! Just because we’re in the middle of a hurricane doesn’t mean you can practise your hurricane punch against me!’ Silhouetted against a streak of lightning, the red-clad figure took no notice. It ran towards the fat figure of the scientist, and one powerful fist blazed out through the sheets of rain, aiming deftly towards Robotnik’s undefended chin.

It connected with a crack, and the rotund figure of the doctor flew upwards and backwards, landing with a splash and sliding a few metres across the muddy ground. He sat up as the figure approached, and stabbed desperately at the control box that he still held. The karate expert stepped closer, its body blazing as the pounding rain struck sparks of fire from it.

Then, with a flash and thump like a bolt of lightning, the figure exploded into a thousand shimmering stars which crackled and spat as they faded into the rain.

Doctor Robotnik sat up in the mud and rubbed his bruised chin. ‘Ah,’ he said thoughtfully. ‘Ah. Ow. Needs a few fine adjustments, I think. And,’ he added, gazing at the spot where the red-clothed figure had stood just an instant before, ‘some waterproofing too.’

1

A SHOCK TO THE SYSTEM

‘Ready, dudes?’ asked Porker Lewis.

‘Set,’ said Johnny Lightfoot.

‘Go!’ shouted Sally Acorn.

Sonic the hedgehog leaped from his crouching position and shot off across the Green Hill Zone at incredible speed, his blue feet in their special friction-resistant red running shoes pounding out a rhythm of several hundred beats per minute across the grass-covered ground, still a little soggy from last night's rain. From behind him he heard a ‘whoosh’ as Tails (you remember, the cute orange fox who has been his friend and companion through several adventures) hurtled off in the opposite direction, spinning his twin tails behind him like a propeller to give him extra speed.

As he pelted away across the Zone, the wind rushing over his face, Sonic smiled to himself. He already knew that he would win the race easily, because he always did.

Over short distances Tails could just about keep up with him, but in a lengthier race Sonic's longer legs, superior streamlining and, well, all-round coolness always gave him the edge. In a really, really long race like this one, across all the Zones of the planet Mobius, it was almost inevitable that the younger racer would get distracted somewhere along the way and would stop to examine something, leaving Sonic to cruise home in an easy first place for the usual round of adulation and ‘Thank-you, adoring fans’ acceptance speeches.

Of course, he reminded himself as he zipped out of the Green Hill Zone and into the Marble Zone, past strange ancient temples and the entrances to networks of underground caverns, dungeons and halls, winning the race wasn't really the point. He and Tails were out on patrol, checking all over the planet at super-speed to see if they could find any

trace of that arch-pain Doctor Robotnik, or any sign of what he was doing at the moment and how he was planning to attempt to take over the planet for the umpteenth time.

There was a second purpose to the race, too. Back in the days before Doctor Ivo Robotnik had appeared on the scene to spread his robots and havoc across the planet, Sonic's friend and mentor, the scientist Doctor Ovi Kintobor had been trying to capture all the chaos energy on the planet, using six huge emeralds he had found and a machine he had invented, the Retro-Orbital Chaos Compressor. In a horrible accident in his laboratory — perhaps because Kintobor had never found the seventh emerald, which was supposed to neutralise the other six — something had gone terribly wrong and the Retro-Orbital Chaos Compressor had blown up, transforming the kindly, thin Kintobor into the, like, totally bonkers, egg-shaped and egg-obsessed Robotnik and scattering the ring-like components of the Chaos Compressor all over the planet.

Sonic had a theory that if they collected enough of the rings, they might be able to rebuild Kintobor's machine and use it to recapture the Chaos Emeralds, maybe even to drain the chaos energy from Robotnik and turn him back into Kintobor. It was a wild idea and a long shot, especially as neither the hedgehog nor his foxy friend knew much about science or chaos save what they'd seen in a recent season of Mad Scientist movies that had been shown on the telly. Furthermore, there were only a few rings left around the zones now. Still, seemed worth a chance, and even on their own the rings did seem to have strange powers when it came to resisting chaos energy and the attacks of Robotnik's droids and robots. Sonic kept his eyes peeled for the slightest twinkle of anything that might be either golden or ring-shaped as he sprinted on.

The last of the Marble Zone's temples disappeared behind him as Sonic entered the Scrap Metal Zone. Once an industrial nightmare, the bare metalwork of this skyrise complex had been left untended to sit in the wind and the rain for years. Without paint or power it had rusted and decayed, its former traps and devices lying idle, its robot guardians gone. The metal platforms clanged ominously as Sonic's shoes pounded across them, and wind whistled across the high rooftops which had once been occupied by deadly Buzz Bombers, Crabmeats, Spikes and Rollers. Once it had been a hive of frantic activity, but now it seemed completely deserted,

untouched and unvisited by anyone since Sonic had last sped through here a month or so ago.

He raced onwards, his legs pumping tirelessly until they became a blur of blue energy, the slipstream blowing over his face and through his aerodynamically arranged spikes, which let him attain the maximum speed possible: 761 miles per hour, or just over the speed of sound. The dull roar of a sonic boom followed in his path, echoing off the sides of the buildings as he zipped past and out of the zone. It was hard to make out the precise details of the zones at such high speed but Sonic knew each one so well that he would have noticed immediately if anything had changed.

The other zones zipped past: the Labyrinth Zone, the Starlight Zone, the Scrap Brain Zone, and then a sharp right turn to take the supersonic hedgehog back through another part of the Green Hill Zone, and from there into the remains of the Chemical Plant Zone, the Aquatic Ruin Zone, the ruins of the Casino Night Zone, the Hill Top Zone, the Mystic Cave Zone, along the beach of what had been the Oil Ocean Zone, and through the corridors and alleys of the Metropolis Zone.

Finally, almost four hours and one complete tour of the zones later, Sonic found himself standing by the crashed remains of Robotnik's Wing Fortress, on the border of the Green Hill and Emerald Hill Zones. The huge carcass of the once-mighty flying machine lay abandoned on the hillside where it had plunged after Sonic had chased Robotnik through it, destroying its central power core along the way. Without its pilot or power source, it had dropped like a three-hundred-metre stone and still lay here, like an immense whale that had mysteriously plunged from the sky. Ivy and creeping plants had begun to clamber up the steel girders of its skeleton, transforming the rusting monolith into a huge abstract sculpture in green and red. It looked quite neat.

Sonic twirled one of the five rings he had found so far around his index finger and sniffed the air. Something was different here, but he was not sure quite what it was. There was a strange smell on the breeze, a little like lightning or the fresh smell of sea air, but not so natural. He looked around. On the grass in front of him was a long muddy skid-mark, as if something fat and stupid had slid across it after being punched on the chin by something very strong. Beside it was a strange scorched mark that had blackened the grass around it in a speckled, star-like pattern. It looked

fresh, but there was no sign of what might have caused it. Sonic shook his head, glanced at the sun, realised that if he did not get a move on there was a chance that Tails might beat him back to the Green Hill Zone, and shot off across the hillside in the direction of his home.

Within less time than it takes to tell, he had screeched to a halt, already back at the place where he and Tails had started out on their patrol run. The zone was quiet and there was nobody around to welcome him back. Sonic looked around.

‘The guys are probably not expecting me back so soon,’ he told himself nonchalantly. There was no reason to worry. He had not noticed anything strange on his patrol, and the air smelled clean and fresh as always. Whenever Robotnik was trying one of his plans, there was usually the heavy odour of machine oil, industrial-grade lubricants, hot metal, exhaust fumes and pollution on the wind. Oh yeah, and rotten eggs, Sonic reminded himself with a grin.

There were no unusual sounds either: no clangs or thumps, or the chugging of small, badly designed robot motors. In fact, thought Sonic as he turned around on the stop, listening carefully, there was almost no noise at all. The wind in the trees, the gushing of the waterfalls... but that was all. Normally he would be able to hear his animal friends laughing and shouting somewhere as they played around, but the zone was quiet. Even the sound of Flicky the Bluebird's excited singing was nowhere to be heard.

Sonic glanced around, but there was still no sign of anyone. He was tempted to wait around for Tails to get back from his patrol so he could crow about having beaten the fox again — this victory made the score 164 to 1 — but he knew that his other friends were more important. He spirited away from where he had been standing, accelerating down the gently sloping hillside and on to the sandy beach beside the lake in the middle of the zone. With his feet churning in the soft surface and sending sprays of sand up into the air, he set off on a lap of the shoreline, slower than his normal pace but keeping a careful eye out for anything that might be a sign of one of his friends.

Nothing. Not a single sight, sound or scent of anything, apart from some paw prints on the sand, and even those looked like they were a few

hours old. It was as if some giant thing had whisked his friends off the face of the planet altogether. The thought crossed his mind that they might be hiding somewhere, planning a surprise party for Tails and himself, but he quickly dismissed that idea. The hedgehog and fox had not done anything particularly heroic recently so there was no cause for a celebration; both the animals were orphans so they did not have birthdays or birthday parties. Besides, he remembered, both Chirps and Sally Acorn had had parties the week before, so all the inhabitants of the zone were feeling pretty partied out.

Sonic arrived back at the place where he had started out, and leaned into the wind, straining his ears in a final effort to hear something. There! In the distance, he could just hear a faint rushing sound, like a very fast aircraft, and it seemed to be getting closer, speeding over the hills and valleys of the zone towards him. He braced himself, ready to leap into a super-sonic spin attack at the first sign of danger, and started in the direction the sound was coming from. A streak of orange and white appeared over the brow of a hill and Sonic relaxed as Tails hurtled up to him and screeched to a stop in a long skid, leaving slick green marks on the grass.

‘Yo, whassup?’ said the fox, panting slightly after his long run. ‘Hey, I found these in the Aqua Lake Zone.’ He opened his paw to display nine gold rings. ‘How many did you get?’

‘Just five,’ replied Sonic, handing them over. ‘I must’ve found almost every single one by now — in the zones I patrol, anyway. There can’t be many left for us to find.’

‘How many have we got now?’ Tails asked.

‘Come on, dude,’ Sonic sighed. ‘We’ve got eight hundred and seventy so far. Add five and nine to that, what do you get?’

‘A million?’ the fox asked hopefully.

Sonic sighed again. One day he would have to check out his suspicion that if he looked up ‘loveable idiot’ in a dictionary, he would find a picture of Tails. The fox was a good friend and a good runner — well, okay, he was an excellent runner, almost as good as Sonic himself — but he was younger than the hedgehog, and his lack of experience and knowledge did mean that sometimes he let Sonic do all the thinking. Sonic knew that Tails

looked up to him as a hero, but that was not a good enough reason for the young fox to rely on his friend to always come up with the answers.

‘A million? Little dude, you're either a doofus or an optimist,’ Sonic said in reply. ‘One thing's for sure: it won't be enough to rebuild the Retro-Orbital Chaos Compressor yet. We'll need every single ring on Mobius for that, and then some. Hey, did you see anything strange while you were zooming around your part of the planet? Like, for instance, the others?’

The fox shook his head. ‘Nope,’ he said. ‘No sign of anything at all. It was all really quiet. Why? Has something happened?’

‘Listen up,’ said Sonic. Tails pricked up his ears and stared attentively at Sonic, as if waiting for him to say something. Nothing happened for a few seconds, then the fox turned to his hero, a confused expression creasing his furry features.

‘What am I supposed to be listening for?’ he asked.

‘Nothing.’

‘Well, I couldn't hear it,’ said Tails. Sonic stared at him, trying to work out whether he meant that he had heard nothing, or whether not hearing nothing meant that he had heard something after all.

‘You didn't hear anything?’ he asked.

‘That's right,’ said Tails.

‘Goo— I mean bad, dude,’ Sonic said. ‘Because while we were racing around the planet seeing if there was anything out there, all our friends who were right here have vanished.’

‘Do what?’ Tails blurted. ‘They can't have — stopped, his head cocked to one side, listening intently for a moment. His expression was serious. ‘You're right, cobber,’ he said. ‘Odds bodkins! I suspect foul play. Elementary, inspector! It's got to be Robotnik.’

‘Slow up, dude!’ Sonic exclaimed. ‘We don't know that yet. Let's look at the evidence, shall we? Fact one: our friends have disappeared. Fact two: the only person we can think of who'd have a reason to do a really nasty thing like that, because he did it before, is Robotnik. Oh yeah. Case closed, I'd say.’

‘A big ten-four to that, good buddy,’ said Tails. ‘We’ve gotta get hip and dig his crazy scene, find his pad, cash his chips and then everything will be copacetic. It’ll be very.’

Sonic gazed at his friend with an expression that was either amazed confusion or confused amazement. ‘Are you feeling okay, small furry pal?’ he asked gently. ‘Do you want to lie down for a while?’

‘Top o’ the world, ma,’ Tails said perkily. ‘Never felt better.’

‘Then why are you talking in gibberish, dude?’ exploded Sonic, his patience with his friend finally reaching its end. Their patrol had drawn a blank on rings and Robotnik, his friends were missing, and now his sidekick was speaking some weird language from the planet Weird. It was almost too much for one hedgehog to bear before lunch.

Tails looked at the ground, then into the sky, at the ground again for luck, then finally met Sonic’s gaze. ‘We—ell,’ he said. ‘You know you’ve been saying I should read more books, like dictionaries, so I’d learn more? Well, I did.’

‘Oh.’

‘I borrowed a book from Porker Lewis, like you said.’

‘Oh.’

‘It was a dictionary, like you said.’

‘Oh.’

‘It’s really good. It’s called *A Dictionary of Out-of-Date Slang*.’

‘Oh great,’ Sonic grated. ‘We’ve only just started on this adventure, I’ve no idea of what I’m meant to be doing yet, and I’ve got a sidekick who’s going to be talking Martian at - me for the whole of the rest of the book.’

‘What book?’ Tails asked.

‘You’re too young to understand,’ Sonic smoothed hastily. Then a thought struck him. ‘Have you been out near the crashed Wing Fortress recently, expanded vocabulary-type dude?’ he asked.

‘Not on your nelly, sergeant-major,’ said Tails.

‘Properly, please.’

‘Nope — er, no I haven't, Sonic. Not for a while. Why? Do you think it's where our friends are? It's big enough for someone to hold them prisoner in there,’ observed the fox.

‘Possible, dude, but wrong. I saw some strange marks on the grass and there was a funny smell in the air as I passed it when I was coming back here — and I beat you again!’

‘In that case you must have been going too fast to see anything properly,’ objected Tails. ‘We do the patrols to check the zones for Robotnik activity, remember, not to see who can do it fastest.’

‘Hey,’ Sonic said, ‘that may be why you do it, but I know I'm a hero. I can cope with anything that Robotnik can throw at me. I'm too cool for him. ‘ He ran a gloved paw over his spikes, preening them back into the smartest possible arrangement on his head and back.

‘Not cool enough to stop your friends disappearing,’ Tails reminded him. ‘Are you going to show me this wild and crazy stuff by the Wing Fortress, or are you chillin’ here?’

‘Okay,’ said Sonic. He was about to say something else, but Tails had already dropped into a running crouch, spun the twin tails that gave him his nickname for a turbo-boosted takeoff, and sped away between the palm trees. Sonic dashed after his friend, and overtook him within a few hundred metres. That was not too hard, because Tails had abruptly stopped running and was staring at something that lay under the overhang of a nearby cliff. Sonic came to a dead halt and jogged back to where the fox was standing.

Tails pointed at the object of his attention with one white-gloved paw. ‘Look,’ he breathed. ‘It's one of Kintobor's old computer monitors, and it's working.’

Sonic looked. Tails was right: the screen of the machine was glowing brightly and showing the message ‘ENTER DATA NOW’ in large white letters. Under the screen the keyboard looked like it had been out in the rain for about four years, which it had, but otherwise the machine appeared to be in perfect working order.

‘It can't be,’ Sonic breathed. ‘I mean, yeah, there are loads of these old computers lying around, but the information-gathering programs that

Kintobor used to run on them went *phut* when the Retro-Orbital Chaos Compressor blew up, and most of the machines ended up with either gold rings or weird science-type power-up devices inside them. Even if this one doesn't, it shouldn't be working. This makes no sense at all, dude.'

'I know,' Tails said as he stared at the screen. 'I'm too young to remember the computer system when it was running properly, but I've never seen a computer that didn't have a power-up in it. What do we do?'

'We go and ask Porker Lewis what he thinks — no we can't, because we don't now where he is. Nuts,' said Sonic. 'Why is there never a boffin around when you need one?' He sat down on a nearby rock and put his chin in his paws, thinking hard. Next to him, Tails straightened up and flexed his fingers.

'This situation calls for a hero,' he said.

'Yeah, dude, and he's sitting here,' Sonic muttered, but Tails was already striding over to the computer. Sonic leaped to his feet, about to dart towards his friend and drag him back, but before he could start running the fox bent down and pressed a button on the keyboard. The message on the screen flickered and changed.

'DATA ACCEPTED, ANALYSING SPECIMEN,' it read. A thin beam of white light stabbed out of the front of the monitor and fixed itself on the tip of the fox's left ear. Tails gave a short, sharp yelp and froze solid, his mouth open and his eyes staring at the machine which held him. The beam of light whipped across his ear, backwards and forwards, as if scanning it, and then moved downwards to cover the rest of his head, and then his body, arms and legs.

Sonic stood back, unable to decide whether he should sprint in to try to grab his friend from the beam and risk being paralysed and analysed too, or watch to see what happened. The latter seemed safest; and besides, the beam did not seem to be harming Tails at all.

The white light ray reached the toe of Tail's right foot and disappeared back into the screen. The words there flickered and changed again.

'ANALYSIS COMPLETE. ACCEPTING SPECIMEN.'

'Nooooooooo!' yelled Sonic, diving across the ground towards his friend, but he was already too late. As his arms closed around Tails, the

fox's orange body flowed out of his grasp as if it was made completely of smoke or light. It began to twist its shape, becoming thin and flat, then disappeared with a faint *whoosh* and a sigh into the machine's screen.

Sonic stared at the machine in disbelief. The message flickered one last time, changing to 'SPECIMEN ACCEPTED AND STORED' before switching back to the way it had been when the two animals had first seen it, with the message 'ENTER DATA NOW' displayed in large white letters.

Sonic's thoughts spun like a whirlwind. Normally he would have smashed the computer into a billion pieces, but having seen his best friend sucked into it, he wasn't going to do anything that might damage the slim chance he had of rescuing the fox.

He sank down to the ground in front of the computer monitor, being careful not to get too close. Was it a heinous trap, or was the machine malfunctioning in some weird way? If he touched the keyboard, would he be sucked into it as well? Had his friends been sucked into this computer — or were all the old monitors on the planet working like this? Perhaps Robotnik had been sucked into one as well, which was why they had heard nothing from him for so long. Did this have anything to do with the strange marks he had spotted near the Wing Fortress? Most important of all, was Tails still alive inside the computer, and was there any way of getting him out?

If only he hadn't teased him about not being a real hero! Sonic knew that Tails looked up to him, but he also knew that the fox wanted to be just like him, and every time he failed it only increased his urge to prove himself a real hero in front of Sonic. That must have been what he was trying to do when he went up to the computer. Unfortunately, as Sonic knew, there was more to being a righteous hero dude than just being brave and foolhardy in the face of the unknown: and now the fox had learned that, to his cost.

Sonic looked up at the screen. It still displayed the words 'ENTER DATA NOW', but as he watched it flickered slightly. The hedgehog was instantly on his feet and backing away, ready to spring in case anything like a beam of white light should appear from it, but instead the letters of the three words wavered and shimmered. Some disappeared, leaving the

rest reading 'ENT AT NO' for a second, and then they too vanished. The screen went black, but patterns of static and lines of interference jumped across it. Slowly a wavering, fuzzy image began to appear in the middle. It was very small, but it was also very orange.

'Tails?' said Sonic in a tiny voice. The image grew a bit bigger, and the familiar face of his friend became clearer. It was grainy and bitty, but Sonic could make out his friend's expression of panic.

'Sonic?' crackled a voice from the computer's tiny speaker. The mouth of the picture of the screen moved, slightly out of synch with the words.

'Sonic, are you there? It's dark in here, and I can't get out. There are other things in here with me. And I'm scared.'

2

MEGA-HURTZ

‘I'm scared,’ Tails repeated, peering up at the rectangle of grey light which hung a few metres above his head. It was the only thing he could see in the dark gloom which surrounded him on all sides. Somebody, *something* out there was making noises: weird echoing grunts, groans, pings and squelches, like a herd of burping hippos playing tennis in a swamp. Tails wrapped his furry arms around himself, shivering slightly. It was chilly in here. He was sure that he would be able to see his breath, if only he could see anything at all.

‘Sonic?’ he called. ‘Sonic, can you hear me? Can anyone hear me? Hello? Hello? Help!’ Nothing happened, except that off in the darkness to his left something made a noise like an exploding grapefruit. Tails felt very, very alone.

I'm a hero, he reminded himself. Heroes aren't scared of things they can't see. Everything's going to be all right. The exploding grapefruit exploded again, this time behind him, and he jumped. ‘Oh, I wish Sonic was here,’ he moaned aloud, sinking his head into his hands.

There was a strange clicking, clinking sound from above him. It sounded a bit like the chains that hauled the spiked platforms in the Marble Zone up and down, and Tails did not want to look up in case that was what it was. Any moment now one of those huge platforms could hurtle down from the darkness beyond the grey rectangle above him, its long spikes aiming straight at him... it was too horrible to think about.

Tails knew he had to find out what had made the clicking noise, but he was afraid to look in case it was as bad as he imagined — and Tails had a very vivid imagination. Keeping his white-gloved paws in front of his eyes, he turned his head upwards, pointing his whiskered nose towards where he thought the noise was coming from. Then, cautiously, he opened two fingers and peered through for an instant before snapping his fingers shut again. The brief glimpse did not reveal anything obviously dangerous, so he slowly opened his fingers again. There, in front of and above him,

silhouetted against the grey background of the strange rectangle that hung in the air, were a series of words in large, bold letters: *?ereht ni u era ,sliat*

Tails gawped at them in surprise. It took him less than an instant to realise that the letters were backwards. ‘“There in u are, Tails?”?’ he pondered, a little confused. ‘I suppose I am in here, but so what — oh, I get it, the words are in the wrong order too. “Tails, are u in there?” Yes!’ he shouted. ‘Yes, I’m in here. Where is here? Who are you?’

There was a brief pause, then a new message began to appear in the grey rectangle above him, each new letter accompanied by the clicking sound as it appeared. *cinoS ,em stI* said the first line, which was quickly followed by *retupmoc eht edisni eruoy*

‘Inside the computer?’ Tails breathed in disbelief. ‘Major uncoolness! Hey, that must be why everything’s looking backwards to me if I’m inside the computer itself, then everything you type would look okay to you but backwards to me because I’m on the other side of the screen. Any chance you could type backwards, old bean? And how come you’re typing without being sucked in like I was?’

This time there was a longer pause, and when the letters did start appearing they came slower. Tails spelled out the message aloud as each new character clinked into place. *Im standding 2 metrs from thhe computr; tiping with a treee branch* was the reply. *Tha’tts why Im soo slow an makking so mny bistakes. Typing backwarts iss not eesy, dud.*

‘Dud yourself!’ shouted Tails, with a grin on his face. He might be trapped inside a computer, but with Sonic on the case he was sure that he would be safely out of the machine in a few moments. ‘Can you smash the computer and let me out?’

There was another pause, then one by one a new string of letters started appearing. *Don't thimk so, dude. It isnt that easy. RU squashd in there?*

‘Squashed? No. It’s dark but I think there’s plenty of room — it’s really huge,’ said Tails, puzzled by his friend’s question. ‘And there’s all sorts of strange noises and things in here as — oh. Oh. I think I know what you’re going to say next.’

Righto, dude, the letters marched across the screen above the fox's quivering nose. You're not stuck in the machine like our buddies got stuck in Robotnik's robot suit — you were actually swallowed by the computer system. You're in its memory. You're software, man. If I smash the monitor, I smash you too.

‘Oh,’ said Tails, struggling to find the right words for the situation. ‘Oh — oh — oh — BOTHER! Blast and confusion. I'm in a pickle and no mistake. Up the creek, In the doldrums. At the end of my tether.’

Something in the darkness near Tails made a very loud, very hungry sound and the fox squealed and jumped away from it. ‘Sonic!’ he moaned. ‘I think something in here is about to eat me, and I can't even see where it is. Is there any way you can switch on the lights in here?’

I'll try, dud! came the reply. >COMPUTER, DO THE LIGHT THING.

For a second the air in the area around Tails filled with a strange buzzing hum, which transformed itself into a grating voice that rumbled and juddered, and sounded as if was pronouncing each word as a different sentence.

‘Do. The. Light. Thing,’ it said slowly. ‘Wrong. Try. Again.’ The voice died away. Tails looked around, to see if he could work out where it had come from, but it seemed to have been all around him.

‘Didn't work, old fruit,’ he called sadly. Try something else.’

Okay, furry pal. >COMPUTER, ACTIVATE SLIGHT WITCH.

‘Hey! Your typing's getting worse!’ Tails shouted up at the grey rectangle. ‘You meant to put “Light switch”, not the other way round. Pay attention —’ The low buzz of the computer's voice interrupted him.

‘Program. Slight. Witch. Activated,’ it said. Something grabbed Tails by the shoulder, pushed hard and whirled him across the dark space. His head whacked into something solid on the far side, and flickery points of light blinked before his eyes.

Something cackled maniacally behind him and the dazed fox rolled over to see, in the darkness, the faint glowing shape of a small, thin person wearing ragged clothes and with a tall, cone-shaped hat. Even though it

was dressed in black, the figure glowed slightly against the darkness, with a strange, ghostly radiance. It giggled again, and a ball of white flickered light began to gather around one of its hands.

‘Lawks a mercy!’ Tails exclaimed, trying to get up from the floor. He quickly decided not to bother when the figure raised its arm and the ball of light split into three and shot across the room, almost singeing the fur on top of his head.

In a sudden flash, the area where Tails was standing was flooded with light. It was not exactly a room, nor exactly an open space, but sort of a mixture of the two. He and the other being were standing on a low, wide wall or pathway which stretched off into the distance, crossing and joining other walls, with deep trenches between them which marked off different areas of space, spreading away on all side like a massive maze. Then another bolt of light sizzled towards him and Tails did not have time to see any more because he was leaping across to the other side of the path to avoid it.

‘Who are you?’ he yelled at the small figure who was attacking him. In the brighter light he could see more of its shape, and his quick eyes and fast foxy reflexes immediately realised there was something strange about the way it moved — jerky and odd, as if each part of its body was being controlled by something different. The figure raised its hands and began to chant something in a very fast, high-pitched squealing voice.

‘Sonic! Help! Turn it off!’ Tails yelled, leaping across the open space towards the menacing attacker. He leaped into the air, whirling his twin tails to spin himself into a whirling ball of orange fur, and hurtled towards the chanting target. He wasn't sure if this would work — a super-spin attack always did the trick when he was smashing Robotnik's badnik creations, but he wasn't sure if this was one of the mad scientist's new designs or something else altogether.

His spinning body smashed into the creature's tall, pointy hat. A jagged crack of electricity jumped between them, throwing Tails back and knocking his assailant off its feet. Abruptly, the lights went out and the area was plunged into darkness, broken only by the faint glow of the strange figure lying on the pathway. As Tails watched, it grew brighter for a second, then it flickered and shrank to a single white dot, which faded

away like the picture on a television set that has just been turned off. Something fell to the ground where the figure had been lying.

‘Whooooah!’ breathed the fox from where he was lying. He looked up. On the screen above him was a new string of words

Are u okay, Tails? Why did u want me to swich the lites of?

‘I didn’t want you to switch them off, I wanted you to deactivate the slight witch — oh, never mind, I did it myself. Just switch the lights back on, okay?’ the fox demanded, striding over to pick up the object which the departing witch had dropped. The room filled with light again, and he studied the strange device. It looked like a pocket calculator, except that the screen was larger, and the buttons had letters on them instead of numbers, plus a few with actual words printed on them: ‘Identify’; ‘Iocate’; ‘Go To’; ‘Delete’; ‘Activate’ and ‘Deactivate’. There was a large ‘2’ printed above its small screen. Tails pocketed it with a shrug, then looked around at the scenery around him — and gasped!

The place was flipping enormous, simply huger than anything or anywhere that Tails had ever seen before. The network of low, intercrossing walls (or paths) stretched away from him into the far, far distance, as far as his sharp vision could see, like an enormous maze or as if he was standing on a street map of the biggest city ever built. The roof or the sky, or whatever it was that this weird place had, shone a vivid red colour, streaked across by occasional flashes and bolts of other colours — shimmering greens, glowing yellows, pulsing purples, electric blues. Above him, in the middle of the technicolor swirl, hung the grey shape of the screen, the flat colour of a television tuned to a dead channel. Tails realised now that it was more than just a few metres above his head; it was absolutely huge, filing about half of the sky. New words scrolled across it, but he ignored them, looking around him instead.

The pathway he was standing on was made of some silver metal. Other pathways ran close to it, and Tails could see blips of light or colour, or strange shapes hurtling along these at high speed, making some of the odd, strange sounds that he had heard before. As he watched, one of them rushed towards him along the pathway that ran next to the one he was on.

‘Hey! HEY!’ shouted Tails. ‘Oi! I say! You there! Coo-ee!’ The thing rushed on towards him, not slowing down at all. The fox could see that it

was a large round thing, a bit like a football or a many-sided crystal, with two smaller spheres balanced on top of it, and two thin arm-like appendages attached to each side of the main ball, which was rolling forward with a regular pinging sound. Tails could not tell whether it had seen or heard him, but he was determined to stop it. He took a few steps back from the edge of the silver pathway, charged forward, jumped into the air — and slammed his foxy nose into an invisible wall! He slid down it, to land on the edge of the trench beside the shining path, and rubbed his nose.

‘Ow,’ he said, and reached out in front of him with both paws, feeling for the invisible wall. It was still there, reaching from the edge of the path up into the sky, so high that the fox could not reach its top even on tiptoe. Beyond its boundary, the trench dropped away, filling with dark and ominous shadows that hid its bottom from sight. Tails could not tell how deep it was.

‘Well,’ he thought aloud, ‘at least I’m in no danger of falling into that and hurting myself. On the other hand, finding out what’s down there is going to be a real pain.’ On the other side of the trench, the multi-sided thing had already sped into the distance. Tails watched it shoot away, then looked up at the grey screen. It was full of words.

‘Chill, Sonic,’ he said, hoping his blue friend could still hear him. ‘Things down here are strange but okay, and so am I — okay, that is, not strange. Just don’t try activating anything again, please.’

Okay dude scrolled the reply. *What shood I do — this typins geting real dul*

Tails was about to think of a reply when a movement at the far edge of the maze, right at the point where the silver pathways met the red sky, caught his attention. Something very big was coming towards him, and it was not sticking to the pathways like the multi-sided thing had. If there were invisible walls around every pathway, then this thing was flying straight through them. It looked like an enormous Buzz Bomber, one of the fiendish robot hornets that Dr Robotnik had created to guard the zones he had taken over the first time he tried to conquer Mobius, but it was huge — its metal wingspan must have been at least twenty metres across. It zoomed closer. Tails stared at it in openmouthed horror for another second, then turned to run away, but before he could even begin to whirl his two

tails to give him a flying start, he heard a booming metallic voice: 'HALT, ROGUE PROGRAM!'

Tails halted. A voice like that was not going to stand for any nonsense. He turned around slowly, arms in the air like he'd seen people do in the movies, and found himself staring into the Buzz Bomber's fearsome tail-mounted tailgun. There was something strange about it — it looked almost too shiny, too clean and smooth to be real.

Come to think of it, he thought, most of this place is like that. Like the things here aren't real at all, they're just — computer graphics! Of course! Tails thought fast as the computer-generated Buzz Bomber hovered over him.

'YOU HAVE NO BUSINESS IN THE VIDEO CARD, ROGUE PROGRAM,' it announced. 'RETURN TO YOUR DESIGNATED TASK AREA OR YOU WILL BE RELOCATED TO A SECURE MEMORY CACHE AND HELD THERE.'

'I'm not a rogue!' Tails said, bluffing desperately. 'I'm a — um — a freelance systems-analyst program. Multi-tasking, too. The latest thing. Yeah. I go all over the shop, checking to see that the computer is running as efficiently as possible. Who are you and what do you do around here?'

'SECURITY SUBROUTINE BB-1, OF THE VIDEO CARD PATROL,' declared the huge insect. 'YOU DO NOT SEEM TO BE VERY EFFICIENT AT CARRYING OUT YOUR PROGRAM. MAYBE I SHOULD TAKE YOU TO THE REPROGRAMMING UNIT FOR IMPROVEMENTS.'

'No, no, I'm very efficient,' said Tails quickly. 'Just watch me. In a moment I'll dash off to check another part of the computer, so fast you'll hardly see me go.'

'YOU'RE ON,' boomed the Buzz Bomber, with just a hint of a chuckle in its ominous voice. Tails swallowed hard, looked at the huge tailgun which was still hovering less than a metre from his head. He could feel the security device watching him, waiting for him to move, and he knew that if he made a slip-up here it would either grab him and take him away to the memory cache, which sounded pretty nasty, or blast him with its cannon, which would be even nastier. Not to mention messy.

Tails turned away from the insect-machine, and glanced over his shoulder as it swivelled to watch him. It was hovering just behind and above him now, and was obviously ready to set off after him the moment he started running. This was one race he must not lose.

‘Ready?’ he asked.

‘READY.’

‘Set?’

‘SET.’

‘You sure you're set?’

‘GET ON WITH IT,’ boomed the machine, but Tails already had got on with it, and gone — dashing off down the metal pathway, not in the direction the robot hornet was expecting, but the other way, under its belly and away into the distance, his foxy feet in their red running shoes beating a desperate rhythm on the solid floor. Behind him he heard a metallic scream of rage and the sounds of massive wings whirring and buzz bombs being fired, but he tucked his head down and sprinted on, as fast as his legs could possibly carry him, his twin tails whizzing behind him like a propeller for that extra spurt of speed.

The silver pathway turned sharp left and then sharp right, zigging and zagging across the huge flat landscape. The metal surface was so smooth that Tails had difficulty keeping his footing as he steered around the bends leaving rubber skidmarks on the slick floor as he accelerated around them. The whirring of the Buzz Bomber's huge wings was getting louder and louder behind him as he hurtled ahead. Occasionally he passed a place where one or two other silver pathways joined the one he was following, but he decided against taking them — this place was a maze, and his best bet for getting out of it and finding any kind of cover or way of protecting himself from the malevolent monster hot on his trail was to keep going in as straight a line as possible. That was his theory, anyway. He hoped it would work in practice.

‘STOP NOW OR BE DELETED!’ boomed a metal voice, deafeningly loud and very close behind him. Tails tucked his head down even lower, put on an extra burst of speed and concentrated on the path ahead. It seemed to be widening out. Suddenly a buzz bomb crashed into the ground

beside him, sending a spurt of molten metal into the air, and it took all Tails's concentration to dodge the droplets as they splattered around him.

‘Sonic! Help!’ he yelped. The pathway was definitely getting wider, and it seemed to be leading to a wide, flat area of some kind — but it was still a long way off, and there was no cover or protection ahead at all. A lesser animal would have given up, but Tails was not going to. ‘A hero never gives up,’ he muttered through gritted teeth, and pushed his last gram of energy into a final burst of super-speed, dashing across the last stretch of silver path and on to the wide open area beyond, zooming under some kind of overhead signpost as he did.

From behind him there was a sudden shriek of android agony and a loud crash. Tails, still running, spun around to look at the Buzz Bomber. It was splattered flat against something invisible at the edge of the wide open space, like a lump of silly putty thrown at a window. As the fox watched, it flickered for a moment, then its body went grey and fuzzy, and shrunk to a single bright white dot which slowly faded into nothingness.

‘Gosh,’ said Tails. ‘Just like what happened to the slight witch. Cool graphics too! I wonder what — WHUMP!’ he exclaimed as all the breath was knocked out of him and he fell over. Tails looked up at what he had run into.

It was a large signpost, just like the one he had run under as he entered the wide open area. This one led on to another silver pathway beyond. ‘YOU ARE NOW ENTERING EXPANDED MEMORY,’ it read. ‘CHECK YOUR PARITY BEFORE PROCEEDING.’

Tails picked himself up, and stared at the sign. He wasn't entirely sure what a parity was or if he even had one, but he checked himself all over anyway, just in case one had spontaneously appeared somewhere on his body. Wasn't it a son of bird evil pirates kept? Anyway, he seemed to be just the same as he had been when he entered the computer, and breathed a sigh of relief as he realised it. Then he turned round and trotted back across the wide space.

It was made of the same silvery substance as the pathway had been, but it covered a much wider area, and there were no trenches cutting it into sections nor, as far as Tails could tell, invisible walls either. In its middle was a large rectangle set into the metallic floor, which buzzed and blurred

with a pattern of static, like the image on a television receiving no signal. As Tails approached, the screen cleared to a solid sheet of black, with yellow letters in its centre.

‘GREETINGS, SLIGHT WITCH PROTOTYPE, SECURITY LEVEL 2,’ it read. ‘THIS IS NODE 1-87-ABH. USE HANDSET TO TRANSMIT OR RECEIVE DATA.’

‘Of course!’ Tails said out loud. ‘It thinks I’m the Slight Witch because I’m carrying the black box thing that it dropped when I beat it. Awesome!’ He pulled the handset from his pocket and slowly and carefully typed the words *Where can I go from here?*

The screen in the floor cleared for a second, and filled with a list — hundreds of names and words, most of them in computer jargon which meant nothing to the confused fox. He caught a few as they flashed past: ‘Expanded memory’ was one, but others like ‘Keyboard buffer’; ‘Database’; ‘Games directory’; ‘Simulator’; ‘Printer port’; ‘WYSIWYG output device’; ‘Device drivers’; ‘Programming language’; ‘Memory cache’; and ‘CPU’ were just a handful of the long list that rushed up the screen and off the top as new ones appeared at the bottom. Tails shook his head, decided to leave the screen to its own thing, and retreated back across the open space to the pathway he had recently been chased down, and looked at the sign at its entrance. ‘YOU ARE ENTERING THE VIDEO CARD. CHECK YOUR GRAPHICS STANDARD,’ it said. Tails stared at it.

‘Video card — that’s what the Buzz Bomber said,’ he murmured, then he looked at the sky. ‘Do you know anything about the way computers work on the inside, Sonic?’ There was no reply. The fox realised with a shock that the grey rectangle of the computer screen, his only link to the outside world, was no longer there. He had not seen it go, but anything could have happened in the chaos of the chase and he would not have noticed it.

‘Bless my ears and whiskers!’ he exclaimed in despair. ‘What am I going to do now? I don’t know anything about computers — I’m the cute sidekick, not the big hero. Sonic should be the one stuck in here, not me. And now I’m completely cut off!’ He closed his eyes tightly for a few

seconds then opened them again, hoping that the grey screen might be there. It wasn't.

‘Nuts! Tarnation! Suffering cats!’ he grumbled, pacing around in distraction. His small foxy mind was a blank. The shock and confusion of being dropped into a computer was almost too much for him to deal with, and now this — it was enough to push even the sanest of cute furry mammals over the edge. He walked back on to the video card pathway, sat down on the cold metal, and then slumped backwards, staring at the sky.

There it was — the big grey screen covering half the sky, and covered in words. Most of them seemed to be *Are you there, Tails?* or a variation on that theme.

Tails jumped to his feet. ‘I'm here!’ he shouted. ‘It's me! Tails calling Sonic, over!’

Where are you?

‘Where were you, more like?’ the fox yelled indignantly. ‘The monitor screen vanished — I couldn't see it any more. Did you switch it off by accident? And what did you do to get rid of the Buzz Bomber, because whatever it was, it worked brilliantly.’

Hang on. I didn't do anything to the monitor— or the Buzz Bomber. There are badniks in there too?

‘Yeah! It said it was part of the video-card patrol — oh,’ said Tails. ‘Oh. Oh, right. I think I get it. It was part of the video part of the computer — the bit that runs the screen — so when it tried to fly out of that, after me, it smacked into something and exploded. And when I ran under the sign I left the video card as well, so I couldn't see the screen any more.’

Glad you know what's going on, dude, because you're talking gibberish to me, typed Sonic from somewhere outside the computer.

‘I think it's making sense to me,’ said Tails, actually not at all sure that it was making sense. ‘The Buzz Bomber said I was a rogue program and he'd take me to some place he called the memory cache. If all our friends have been sucked inside the computer, that's where they must be. Strewth, I hope they're all right.’

Even if the others are in this cache place, how do I get you lot out of there? typed the unseen Sonic. Tails started at the words floating in the

grey space above his head and racked his brains. Unbelievably, something occurred to him.

‘Hang on a sec— I’ll be back in two shakes of a lambkin’s tail,’ he called.

2 *WHAT?* appeared on the floating screen above him, but Tails had already dashed off, back towards the other screen which lay in the middle of the open space, or the gnode’ as its first message had called it. As Tails approached, he could see the tail end of the long list of places and things and computer bits still showing on the screen. Quickly he scanned the list, searching for me that he vaguely remembered seeing flash past him — yes, there it was! The words *WYSIWYG output device* glowed faintly near the bottom of the list. Tails grinned at them and pulled out the black box device. He tapped in the words, hit the ‘Identify’ button and waited for something to happen.

It did. The screen cleared and the computer’s sonorous voice filled the air as pictures, images, diagrams and three-dimensional blueprints flashed onto the display in front of him.

‘The. Whizziwig. Output. Device,’ announced the coarse electronic voice. ‘Developed. By. Doctor. Robotnik. To. Create. Real. Versions. Of. Images. And. Devices. Designed. Inside. The. Electronic. Graphics. Creation. Computer. System. Or. EGCS. For. Short. Short. Short. Short. Circuit. Short. Circuit. Wrong. Try. Again. Now. Spell. Artichoke. Incorr—’

The screen shimmered, the diagrams disappeared and through a haze of static, a familiar and rather unpleasant face appeared. It was pink and round, and it sported a bright orange moustache on its upper lip, so large that Tails thought for a moment that it had a fox stuffed up each nostril, with only their tails showing. The face looked sternly out of the screen.

‘Which of my programmed creations is trying to access my personal restricted data?’ it asked. Then it caught sight of the fox who was staring down at it, and its moustache wagged wildly as it burst into hysterical laughter.

‘Ha ha ha! Tails the foxy fox, caught by his own cunning in my magnificent computer system! Ha ha ha! I am eggstatic with glee and transfixed by my own ingenuity! Ha ha ha!’

‘Well well well,’ breezed Tails coolly, ‘if it isn't our old pal Stinky Weasel Teeth. Hello, Doctor Smelly Ivo Egg-Features Robotnik, you mad coward. We might have known you were behind all this.’

‘We? WE? You distinctly said “we”, my renegade reynard. Could it be that I have trapped your bothersome blue buddy in the chips of my delightful device too? Oh, do say yes. It would make me eggstremely happy.’

‘I'm not going to tell you, so nerr!’ Tails said tartly. ‘And just you wait! We're going to find our friends and get out of here and come and smash you and your stupid EGCS computers — it's always eggs with you, isn't it? Eggs, eggs, eggs. You're addle-pated, you!’

‘I'm what?’ the figure of Robotnik snarled. ‘I don't know what that is, but I don't like the sound of it. Your time has come, verminous villain.’ He turned away for a second, then turned back. ‘I've just notified my virus search-and-destroy program that there's a new virus in the computer — an orange fluffy one. In seconds you will be completely obliterated! Deleted! De-rezzed! Reduced to your component subroutines! Aha ha ha ha! Ha ha ha ha ha!’

The screen abruptly blanked out, leaving Tails staring at it in wide-eyed disbelief.

‘I'm wide-eyed in disbelief,’ he said truthfully. ‘Better tell Sonic about this.’ He dashed back across the metal plain towards the video card pathway, and the waiting grey screen.

‘Sonic!’ he yelled. ‘Oi! Robotnik knows I'm in here, and he's sent a program to get me! I've got to get out now. Stand back from the computer!’

He brandished the black box and punched its keys in rapid order, typing *WYSIWYG output device*. The words appeared on the small display in front of him. Tails took a deep breath, closed his eyes and pressed the ‘Go To’ button. If getting out of a computer was anything like getting into one, he wasn't going to enjoy it much.

The ride seemed very smooth. After a few seconds he opened his eyes — to find that nothing had changed. Well, almost nothing. On the black machine's screen was a new message: *WYSIWYG output device* not yet operational. Try again later.

‘Augh!’ cried Tails, then he jumped, startled, as something shook the floor around him. A low rumble came from the distance, growing louder by the second. The fox looked up at the screen in desperation.

‘Sonic — listen up and listen good!’ he cried. ‘You've got to find the output device and get it working, or I'm stuck in here. I'll try to get away from Robotnik's programs, find our friends and get them all to inside the device, ready to be outputted or put out or whatever.’ Tails crossed his fingers for luck; he was going to need all the help he could get. Behind him, the rumbling was growing much louder. ‘I'm gonna have to leave the video card part of the computer, so we won't be able to swap messages for a while, so I guess this is goodbye for now.’ He crossed the rest of his fingers, and then some of his toes, hoping that it would not be goodbye forever. ‘Okay, old pal? Old buddy?’ he said. ‘Did you get that? Sonic?’

There was no answer. Above him, the grey screen which filled half the sky was blank and silent.

3 BUILDING BIG BROTHER

Sonic was no longer standing at the computer terminal in the Green Hill Zone. The moment he had read his friend's words, he had not bothered to waste time with a reply but in true Sonic manner had dashed away, looking for any clues that might lead him to this 'output device'. He had no idea where he might find it, or where to start looking, or even what he was actually looking for, but after a long time tapping letters into the computer's keyboard with a tree branch, he was glad of the chance of some potentially heroic action.

'The little dude knows what he's doing — he'll be cool,' he told himself. 'Besides, what was I meant to do — jump in there after him? That way we'd both have been stuck in the machine and that bogus big-head Robotnik would have won.' Nope, he decided, he was definitely doing the right thing. Whatever that was. Meanwhile, he was enjoying the feeling of the wind in his spikes, the feeling of speed and the roar of the slipstream rushing in his ears as he sped across the hillsides of his home zone.

Suddenly, his sensitive hedgehog hearing picked up a tiny sound out of the ordinary and he screeched to a halt, sending dust and leaves flying into the air around him. When the mess had settled, everything was quiet: whatever had been making the sound was silent now. Sonic turned slowly around in a full circle. There was nobody to be seen, but a nearby bush was shaking slightly, quivering even. Sonic walked towards it, stopping a few paces away.

'Hmm; a nervous bush? I think not! I don't know who you are, but if you're an animal then I'm your friend. If you're a robot —' he clenched his fists — 'then I'm your scrap dealer. Which is it?' There was no reply, but the bush shook a little harder. 'Come on, anonymous shrub-hiding dude,' Sonic said, 'I know you're not Robotnik: that plant is way too small for him to hide in. He'd need a whole forest to conceal his stomach. Look, I'm Sonic the Hedgehog; who are you?'

There was a little whimpering sound from inside the bush, then the leaves rustled and a small white animal clambered out. It was obviously a female animal, but Sonic did not recognise what species she was at first. Her body was covered with short, white fur, and she had short arms and legs with delicate, long-fingered hands, and a long thin white tail. Her face was long and pointed, with a long snout which tapered down to a pink She had pink ears and pink eyes as well, and a frightened little voice.

‘Are you really Sonic?’ she squeaked.

‘Naw, I’m just any old cool blue totally heroic hedgehog who happens to be wandering around the Green Hill Zone,’ Sonic replied. ‘We’re common as muck around here.’

‘Oh, ‘ said the small creature in disappointment. ‘Oh. I’ll be going, then. Sorry to bother you.’ She turned and started to walk away across the Zone. Sonic jogged after her.

‘Wait, wait!’ he said. ‘I was joking. I’m Sonic.’

The little creature turned and studied him with her big pink eyes. ‘Really?’

‘Really, little shy dudess,’ said Sonic. ‘How can I help your small and quivering self?’

The stranger looked at him for another long moment, then fell to her knees in front of him. ‘Oh Mister Sonic, you great hero of international renown,’ she begged. ‘Please, please, please you’ve got to help us.’

‘Chill out, my furry friend,’ said Sonic. ‘Whassup — no, wait, before you tell me, you’d better introduce yourself. I bet the readers want to find out as much as I do.’

‘Readers?’ the animal asked, looking up at him through moist eyes.

‘Uh, ignore that. Didn’t say anything. Just talking to myself,’ Sonic replied, covering his tracks badly. ‘Who are you, anyway?’

‘My name’s Ichneumon, but my friends call me Iggy,’ said the animal. ‘I’m a mouse. I’ve come all the way from the Mystic Cave Zone, all on my own, to find you because something really horrible’s happened there.’

‘The Mystic Cave Zone, eh? said Sonic. ‘I passed through there a couple of hours ago — at about 1,225 kilometres per hour, so it’s not

surprising I didn't see you. Let me guess: all the monitor screens have come back on and all your little furry mouse friends have gone missing.'

'How did you know?' asked Ichneumon in amazement.

'Because the same thing's happened all over, young cheese-eating-type dude. It's Robotnik's latest scheme to take over the planet. Even my bestest buddy Tails has got sucked into one of his fiendish machines.'

'Tails got captured too?' Iggy squeaked in alarm. 'All my friends, all my relations, my parents, my older brothers and sisters — and Tails too! The horror! The horror! Do you know where they are, Mister Sonic, and can you save them? You're a really big hero — all my elders and betters used to talk about the way you saved them from being trapped inside robot suits the last time Robotnik tried to take over.'

Sonic remembered it well, but it was neat to be reminded. 'Yeah,' he said. 'Robotnik had put them into Flasher and Crawlton robots, hadn't he? I've always liked the Mystic Cave Zone. It's a very cool place with most excellent background music. So how many of you are left there, Iggy?'

'One,' said the mouse.

'One?' asked Sonic, his eyes wide with surprise. 'And let me guess: I'm talking to that one, right?'

'Right, Mister Sonic,' said Iggy, and collapsed into the begging position again. Sonic sighed and looked up into the sky.

'If this is the sort of sidekick I'm going to have to put up with for the rest of this adventure,' he said to nobody in particular, 'then I want it recorded that I'm not happy. All this begging stuff is just wasting time. Let's get back to the plot, eh?'

Iggy looked up at him, and climbed to her feet. 'I'm sorry to do all this,' she said, 'only I'm very young and very small and very scared and this is the first time I've been outside the Mystic Cave Zone and everything's so strange here and I was really scared after what I heard the robots say, and I came all this way on my own, and — '

'Hey, hey, back up a seconds there,' said Sonic. 'You said robots. I heard you. What robots, where?'

‘Robots, here, just before you arrived,’ said Iggy. ‘That’s why I was in the bush. I was hiding from them and I thought you were another one.’

‘What did they look like? Where were they going? What did they say?’ the hedgehog asked eagerly. This sounded like it might be the lead he had been waiting for. If there were robots around, it meant that Robotnik had started one of his plans. Computer systems and vanishing friends were hard to deal with, but robots — heck, he could smash robots. ‘What robots?’ he repeated.

‘Big chunky blue and red ones,’ said Iggy. ‘They were on caterpillar tracks, wearing caps, and they had little arms.’

‘Burrobots,’ said Sonic, remembering the creatures from the Labyrinth Zone, where they had waited to ambush him by jumping out of the ground. They were powerful all-round workers, able to function underwater and underground as well as on the surface. Their only disadvantage was that they moved quite slowly, but their spinning drill nose cones still made them fearsome foes. He shivered at the memory.

‘There were four of them,’ Iggy continued doggedly (or should that be mousedly?). ‘Two of them were carrying something really big and heavy in a packing case, one of them was carrying something smaller, and the other one was bossing the other three around.’

‘Which way did they go?’ asked Sonic.

‘Off that way,’ said Iggy, pointing. Sonic’s eyes followed her finger.

‘Towards the crashed Wing Fortress,’ he realised. ‘Of course! I wonder if they had anything to do with the strange marks I saw there earlier. Anyway, no time to waste. Are you coming with me, young mouse-type person?’

Iggy looked at him dubiously. ‘Aren’t you going to do something about all my friends and relations sucked into the computers?’ she asked. ‘I thought you were a hero, and heroes are meant to rescue people and do stuff like that.’

‘Be cool,’ said Sonic. ‘What’s the point in trying to rescue them if we only get caught in the same trap? My heroic hedgehog-sense tells me there’s something bigger going down here than just this computer thing, and we won’t be able to free our friends until we solve that. There’s a

saying we have in the Green Hill Zone. Well, I have it anyway, and it goes: "Foxes rush in where hedgehogs fear to tread." That's why Tails is stuck inside the computer and I'm not. If you help me, I guarantee that we'll get your friends out of the machine as soon as possible.'

'You mean it?' said the mouse, her face lighting up. 'Oh, happy, happy, joy joy!' She did a little dance of joyful happiness with a manic grin on her face. Then she stopped and looked thoughtful. 'You know, Mister Sonic,' she said, 'in the Mystic Cave Zone, we have a saying too: "The best laid schemes o'mice an' hedgehogs gang aft a-gley!"'

'Very interesting,' said Sonic. 'Do you know what it means?'

'No,' said Iggy. 'Actually, I was hoping you could tell me.'

Sonic gave her his best 'Oh, a wise-guy, eh?' look. 'Enough of this frivolity,' he said. 'Let's get going. Can you keep up, or do you want a hedgehoggy-back ride?'

'I'm not sure I can run as fast as you, but I'm not sitting on your back,' said Iggy, looking at the array of sharp — not to mention fashionable — blue spikes which lay across Sonic's back in an aerodynamic pattern. Sonic did not reply, but set off across the green, green grass of the zone at a leisurely jog. To his surprise the white mouse dashed after him at surprising speed and had overtaken him within a few metres.

'Hey, you're no slouch!' called Sonic, increasing his speed to catch up with her. 'It looks like-you've been training. Are you a fan of mine or something?'

'Not something, someone,' Iggy shouted. 'I'm a member of Tail's fan club. I love Tails! He's so *cute*! I learned everything I know about running from him.'

'Fantastic,' Sonic shouted, not meaning it. 'Everyone should have someone they look up to. ' Actually, he thought, if she looks up to Tails and Tails looks up to me, then I'm like her grand-running father or something. He put on a spurt of speed, drawing ahead of the small mouse, and made sure that he stayed a few metres ahead of her all the way until the huge outline of the crashed Wing Fortress came into view.

'Not bad, kid,' he said to the mouse, slowing down as they reached the hull of the once-mighty sky ship. 'You've got promise. Stick with me

and we'll go places.'

'Like where?' the mouse asked cautiously.

'Well, in there for a start.' Sonic pointed his thumb at the yawning entrance of the crashed fortress.

'Eugh! Why? It's dark and scary in there,' Iggy objected, inching away.

'Oh come on,' said Sonic. 'You're from the Mystic Cave Zone and you're afraid of the dark? Give me a break already! We gotta go in there, for three reasons. Firstly, that's the way the robots went.' He pointed at the ground, where the distinctive marks of the Burrobots' tracks were clearly visible in the soft earth, leading towards the entrance. 'Secondly, there's some clues around here that I haven't had time to check out yet. And thirdly, I've got this funny feeling that says that it's the place to go.'

'A funny feeling?' asked Iggy. 'What, like indigestion?'

'More like a danger sense,' said Sonic. 'It's a hedgehog thing. You wouldn't understand.'

'Let me get this straight,' Iggy said, putting her small hands on her slim white hips and staring at him. 'You want me to go in there with you because some undefined weird sense of yours says that it might be dangerous?'

'Yup,' Sonic said. 'On Mobius, where there's danger, there's usually a certain fat arch-villain who deserves a good punch in the egg-basket.'

Iggy nodded. 'Okay, that sounds fair. What are we waiting for?' Before Sonic had time to react, the unusually swift mouse darted towards the overgrown entrance way.

'No, come back!' yelled the hedgehog in vain. 'The Burrobots' tracks lead into the ship, but they don't lead out again!' But the white shape of the mouse had already disappeared into the darkness of the ship's interior. A second later a muffled squeak and shriek came from within. Sonic pricked up his ears, straining to pick up another sound, but he could hear nothing else.

'Scratch one sidekick,' he muttered, then immediately felt bad. He had not known Iggy very long, but she had been so ridiculously trusting of

his heroic abilities that he knew he could not let her down now, no matter how much danger lurked in there. What had she said? Four Burroboats. That should be no problem for a dude of his astounding abilities, but there was no time to waste. With the famous hedgehog battle cry of ‘Eat sonic-spin death, you disgusting robotic weirdos!!’, he charged into the interior of the crashed sky ship.

Inside, everything was cool and dark. Strings of creepers and moss hung from the girders and gantries which stretched overhead, and thin beams of sunlight filtered down through cracks in the fuselage high above. Everything was rusted, and looked as if it had not been disturbed for years — not since the Wing Fortress had plummeted from the sky. Sonic looked down. Under his feet, though, the metal floor was bright and shiny, as if it had been polished recently. That was suspicious, but it was also a problem — the clean metal did not show any Burroboat tracks.

Sonic looked around him and sniffed the cool air. It smelled of rust and moist moss, but just faintly he could detect a tinge of hot motor oil, and it seemed to be coming from one of the corridors that led away into the depths of the ship, towards the rear where the Wing Fortress's huge jet engines had been. At that very moment, a faint clanging sound came from that direction. Without a second thought, Sonic sprinted down the corridor, every step sending a hollow booming sound echoing through the deserted ship.

Did we say deserted? Not any more, the blue hedgehog realised as he shot out of the end of the corridor into a huge room. All the animals in the Green Hill Zone had assumed that the massive flying machine had been abandoned after it had crashed, but this room was filled with polished, shining equipment, stacked up to the ceiling. Someone had obviously been busy here. In the middle of the room was a stack of wooden crates, each marked with incomprehensible symbols, and in front of them stood two Burroboats, their red and blue shapes glistening from the neon lights overhead. They looked a little like human beings, except made of metal, and instead of legs they had large, solidly built caterpillar tracks. Each round metal head was topped with a red baseball cap, and each one had a large, cone-shaped drill instead of a nose. The drills were spinning viciously, with a low humming noise which reverberated around the large room. There was no sign of Iggy anywhere.

‘Not one step closer, hog,’ grated one of the two Burrobots, sneering at him from under the rim of its grubby baseball cap.

‘What have you done with the mouse?’ demanded Sonic. ‘Let her go!’ The two robots looked at each other and sniggered in a high-pitched mechanical giggle. They were clearly not going to answer him. Sonic took a few paces into the room towards the jeering droids, and then turned as he felt something hit the floor behind him. The metal panels buckled and burst, and two other Burrobots leaped out from the hole they had created, their red nosecones buzzing as they advanced. Sonic stood his ground.

‘Where’s the mouse?’ he demanded again. ‘This is your last chance.’

‘No, Sonic, this is your last chance!’ one of the robots sniggered as the four metal creations, each one nearly as tall as Sonic himself, advanced towards him. The hedgehog ignored their taunts: he was straining his hearing, trying to catch a stray sound. There it was again — a faint but familiar voice shouting ‘Help me! Help meee!’ But where was it coming from? Our hero twisted his head around, ears swivelling like pointy blue radar dishes to pick up the sound. It seemed to be coming from inside one of the advancing Burrobots!

Sonic leaped high into the air, spinning his blue body like a catherine wheel until his blue spikes were a circle of whirring points, and then dropped down on to the bots, who had all stopped moving and turned to gawp up at him. The rotating hedgehog’s body slammed into the first one, smashing its metal frame into shrapnel, and bouncing back into the air. The other three robots suddenly realised that they had a real fight on their hands and began to back away, but their caterpillar treads were too slow, and the metal floor was too slippery for them to get a proper grip. Sonic walloped into the nearest one, sending it skidding across the floor into the third, and the two sped out of control across the room, to crash into the wall, where they exploded.

Sonic advanced on the final Burrobot which was retreating away from him as fast as its treads could carry it. ‘And now,’ it said in a worried tone of voice, ‘it is down to you, and it is down to me.’ Sonic advanced further. ‘If you wish the mouse hurt, by all means keep moving forward,’ the bot continued. If Burrobots had been programmed to sweat, this one would have had beads of industrial lubricant pouring down its smooth metal

forehead and dripping off the end of its driller nose. Sonic kept moving forward. Suddenly the tension was broken by a sound from inside the robot's chest.

‘Sonic?’ squeaked a voice. ‘Get me out of here!’

The Burrobot stared down at its stomach. ‘Shut up in there!’ Sonic took a fast step forward, swung his right fist and gave the robot a solid *thwack!* on the chin. Its round head flew off its shoulders and hurtled across the room. It bounced against the far wall, fell to the floor and rolled into the centre of the room with a surprised and hurt expression on its metal features. Then it blew up with a sorry puff of dirty grey smoke.

Sonic helped Iggy climb out of the remains of the robot's body. The mouse's white fur was covered in greasy stains, but she was unhurt, and very grateful to be free again.

‘Thank you, Sonic,’ she said. ‘You're really a superhero.’

‘I know,’ Sonic said.

Iggy looked up at him. ‘That's not very modest.’

‘Hey, when you're as cool as I am, who needs modesty?’ Sonic breezed. ‘You know I'm good, I know I'm good, the rea — everyone knows I'm good, so why should I pretend I'm not? Come on, let's see what's in these crates.’

Together they walked over to the pile of boxes and began examining them. There were at least seven, and each one was covered in odd symbols that the hedgehog did not recognise. Iggy clambered up onto one of them.

‘Careful,’ Sonic warned.

‘I will be. Hey, look,’ said the mouse. ‘There's something written here.’

‘What does it say?’

‘It says: “Big Brother WYSIWYG Output Device WOD890. For use with networks. Batteries not included. This side up. Use no hooks. Do not drop, fold, spindle, mutilate or broil. For external use only. Keep away from children, pets, magnets or direct sunlight under three years old. Do not operate while the train is standing in the station. Just say no. Investments can go down as well as up...” ‘

‘Okay, okay,’ Sonic interjected. ‘I think we’ve heard enough of that. But this is the thing we need to get the others out of the computer system — at least, that was what Tails said.’ He bent down, picked up a stray arm from one of the smashed Burrobots and used it to prise open the largest crate. Inside were a huge amount of polystyrene packing peanuts. The hedgehog and mouse burrowed through them, and finally came up with an instruction manual. Sonic opened it at page one.

‘Here we go: “Congratulations on choosing the Big Brother WYSIWYG Output Device WOD890 for your computer network”,’ he read. ‘What’s WYSIWYG when it’s at home? It sounds like a rocket-powered hairpiece, but that can’t be right.’

‘It stands for “What You See Is What You Get”,’ Iggy said, looking up from examining something she had found in the crate. ‘It’s a computer thing. You wouldn’t understand.’

‘Oh, okay,’ Sonic said, and continued reading. ‘ “Once you have assembled this fine piece of equipment, it will produce full 3D versions of any design stored on your system.” Any design? Wow! That’s a cool piece of kit.’

‘ “Kit” is the right word,’ Iggy moaned, surfacing from the sea of packing peanuts in the large crate. She held more oddly shaped pieces of metal and plastic in either hand. ‘The crate is full of these bits and pieces, and I think we’re going to have to build the machine ourselves. It’ll take hours.’

‘Nuts! Nuts nuts nuts!’ Sonic exclaimed, then stopped himself as he realised he was making himself feel hungry. ‘Trust Robotnik to do the cheapskate thing and save a few beans by buying the kit version. It’s okay for him: he has robots to build stuff for him. I don’t suppose Big Brother bothered to include a tool kit, did they?’

Iggy dived back into the packing case, and resurfaced with a single small screwdriver. Sonic looked at it, then at her, then at it again. ‘I guess we’ll just have to improvise,’ he said glumly.

Once the rest of the crates had been broken open and the part of the Laser Output Device spread across the floor according to a diagram that Iggy had found taped to the underside of the largest crate’s lid, the two

animals realised that the situation was not as bad as it had seemed at first. Most of the parts of the machine slotted or clipped together quite easily, without any screws, bolts or glue. The trouble was that the diagram Iggy had found had all its instructions in some other language which seemed to be a mixture between Double Dutch, Treble Japanese, Quantum Physics and Gobbledygook, and it was not at all clear exactly what bit went where, or why. Sonic desperately flipped through the instruction manual, which at least was in a language he could read, but that only told them what to do with the machine once it was built.

‘It's like a giant jigsaw,’ Iggy complained, digging the last piece out of the final crate. ‘I mean, most of these parts could fit anywhere.’ She held up a particularly strange part of the device: round like a ball, with a hole through the middle and a keypad attached to it by a cord. ‘What do you suppose this bit is?’ she asked. ‘Input? Output? Shot-put? Kaput?’

‘I know what you mean,’ Sonic said, studying something that looked like a doll's-house table with two kilometres of thin wire wound around it. ‘Is it a bird? Is it a plane? All we know is that it's gotta fit together right, or we'll end up with a big pile of burnt-out circuits, and our pals will be stuck inside the computer forever. So be careful.’

They set to work. Sonic concentrated hard on the diagram: it might be in the wrong language but it was the best advice they had. He knew that Tails was depending on him — assuming that Tails had got away from the thing that was chasing him, which he couldn't be sure about. He also knew that the fox was probably being chased by more of Robotnik's diabolic security devices inside the chips of the computer network, and so the device had to be finished as soon as possible. On his own, Tails was a fast runner and could probably dash his way right around the planet, zipping from computer to computer down the huge network of wires that Sonic had helped his old friend Ovi Kintobor lay through the zones, but if he had found the other animals then he would be looking after them, and they would really slow him down. He'd be a sitting target. That thought gave Sonic a sense of urgency and he gave the work an extra burst of speed.

After several long minutes the device had begun to take shape, as the two of them frantically slotted pieces together, fitted wires into junction boxes, installed circuit boards and plugged cables into sockets. It stood about three times as tall as Sonic himself, and the outside was made of

steel plates riveted together and covered in a thin plastic coating. At the bottom of the machine, at Sonic's eye level — Robotnik's too, the hedgehog reminded himself — was a row of buttons and lights, and above that was a large slot. At the back of the machine, beside the slots to let the heat out, one thick cable led out of the back. This plugged into a large socket on the wall, beside one of Robotnik's computer monitors which was showing a picture of the test card — Robotnik sitting by a blackboard, playing noughts and crosses with one of his Moto-Bug robots. The fat scientist was about to place his fifth cross and win the game, and it looked as though the Moto-Bug had not had a turn yet. As Sonic plugged the end of the cable into the wall socket, Iggy stuck her head out of the slot in the front of the machine, hanging upside-down by her tail from something inside.

‘I think we're done,’ she said, ‘except I can't find any- where to fit this last piece.’ She brandished a strange red component with a grabber or pincer at the end of it.

Sonic laughed out loud. ‘That's not a piece of the machine,’ he said. ‘That's a piece of one of the Burrobots we smashed. Come on, it's Moment of Truth time.’ He reached up and lifted Iggy down from the slot, then placed the small white mouse on his shoulder so that she was the same level as the panel of buttons.

‘Oh, can I?’ she asked. When Sonic nodded she reached out and flicked the ON switch. Nothing happened.

‘Nothing's happening,’ she said.

‘You're right,’ Sonic said. ‘Clever of you to spot that. Maybe there's a future for you in the hero business.’

‘You think so?’ asked Iggy.

‘No, not really,’ Sonic said. ‘Where's that instruction manual gone?’ Iggy stood up, balancing precariously on his shoulder for a moment, and then jumped from it into the nearest crate, which was still full of polystyrene packing pieces. Small chunks of expanded fluff flew into the air like a synthetic snowstorm, and the mouse surfaced a moment later with the pamphlet in her paws.

‘Here it is,’ she said. ‘ “Big Brother WYSIWYG Output Device WOD890. For use with networks. Batteries not included. This side —” ’

‘That’s it,’ Sonic exclaimed. ‘No batteries — no power. And it looks like a thing like that’s going to require a lot of power. Does it say how much?’

The white mouse flipped through the book. ‘Page eighteen — here it is. “The number of AA batteries required to power the WOD890 is eight hundred and sixty. Alternatively, you can use a power feed from your nearest high-voltage electricity cable. Contact your local mad scientist for details.” Ter-rific. Where are we going to find power like that?’ She closed the book and flung it across the room.

Sonic looked up at the machine. ‘Robotnik wouldn’t have had all this stuff brought here unless there was some- where he could plug it in,’ he said. ‘But where? This place is a ruin. There’s been no power here since it fell out of the sky — hang on.’ An idea was forming in his mind. ‘Quiet,’ he shushed.

Iggy looked up from where she was sitting, but was sensible enough not to ask why. Together the two of them stood still and listened to the sounds of the ship around them, Sonic’s sensitive hero-hedgehog hearing tuning in to every noise. In the distance was a very faint irregular clanging, like a piece of loose metal blowing in the wind, but Sonic ignored that. There was the faint humming of the fan in the computer monitor behind the laser output device, but he ignored that. There was Iggy’s shallow breathing, but he ignored that. There was only one strange noise left— a low thrumming sound from below their feet.

‘Of course!’ Sonic exclaimed with a click of his fingers, making Iggy jump. ‘The Wing Fortress’s power plant. It’s right below us. When Robotnik repaired this place, he must have rebuilt that as well. How long has he been working here without us knowing? It’s a perfect place for a secret headquarters.’

‘That’s all very well,’ Iggy said, ‘but how do we get down to it? And how do we get power out? We can’t exactly call up Robotnik and ask him.’

‘Getting down is easy,’ Sonic said, pointing to the holes in the floor that the two Burrobots had leaped through. ‘And maybe we can’t ask the

fat controller, but we can ask his computer.' He pointed with his thumb at the screen on the other side of the room.

Iggy looked at him, and looked dubious. 'Won't we get sucked in?'

Sonic's forehead creased in thought: he hadn't thought about that. 'Only one way to find out,' he said. 'Where's that Burrobot's arm?' Iggy passed it over, and the hedgehog carefully lobbed it across the room towards the screen. It bounced once and landed on the computer's keyboard. A large letter *J* appeared on the screen, but nothing else happened.

'There, it's safe,' Sonic said. 'Of course — if it's the one Robotnik was going to use, it would be. Now, do you want to do the typing, or do you want to go down into the depths of the ship?'

Iggy looked worried. 'Neither,' she admitted. 'But back in the Mystic Cave Zone. I was a bit of a computer expert. Iggy the Hacker, they called me.'

'Great,' Sonic said. 'Get in there and tell me what I ought to be doing. And shout loud, because these floors are pretty solid.' Without another word he rushed over to the edge of the holes the Burrobots had made, and dropped through to the deck below.

It was dark down there, and it took the hedgehog's keen eyes a few seconds to adjust to the gloom. Although the space around him was dark, ahead of him he could see a single large object that seemed to be glowing from a light inside it. It looked like a large, fat flying saucer, the type you might see in bad old black and white movies, but it was probably a desk. There was another one of Robotnik's computer terminals sitting on top of it. Sonic approached them cautiously, taking one step at a time. Something wrapped itself around his leg, and he stumbled and fell.

'A snake! A tripwire! A lasso! A snare!' he shouted, flailing on the ground and trying to fight the thing, and then, when he realised it wasn't fighting back, he sat up and felt it. 'Oh,' he said sheepishly, finding a plug at one end. 'It's an electric flex.' He unwrapped it from around his leg, coiled it up and carried on towards the glowing thing. He could feel the low vibration and humming growing stronger as he got closer, and Sonic felt the spikes on his neck standing up.

It was much bigger than it had seemed at first, and as Sonic drew close he saw it was covered with dials and read-outs and screens and keyboards and buttons and knobs and switches and sockets — and a half-eaten egg sandwich. ‘Robotnik’s been here all right,’ he said grimly, then looked upwards at the ceiling. ‘How’s it going up there?’ he shouted.

‘Pretty good,’ Iggy’s high voice squeaked back faintly. ‘There should be a socket on the control desk, where you can plug in a power cable.’ Sonic looked at the plug in his hand. ‘Convenient, that,’ he said, and pushed it into the only socket on the desk that looked right. It slid home: a perfect fit. ‘Is that it?’ he shouted.

‘You’ve got to type in a password before we can get any power out,’ came the reply. ‘Hang on, I’ve almost found it. Is there a keyboard there?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then type in...’ There was a pause, and then a giggle. ‘Type in “Sonic is an eggscruciatingly egotistical enemy of egg-lovers everywhere”.’

Sonic could not quite believe what he had heard. ‘That’s it?’ he asked.

‘That’s the password,’ replied Iggy from above.

‘Uh — is that “excruciating” with an X or a double-G and an S?’ asked the hedgehog.

‘Double-G, S,’ echoed down from above. Sonic typed it in. There was a click, the humming sound rose slightly, and the needles of three of the dials on the desk jumped. Sonic bent to pick up the coil of cable as Iggy’s voice came again.

‘Be careful — that cable will be carrying enough electricity to turn you into Hedgehog Flambé.’

‘What’s that?’ Sonic yelled up; his idea of good food came in flat boxes marked ‘Pizza To Go’.

‘Burnt to a crisp.’

‘Now she tells me,’ Sonic muttered as he carefully picked up the reel of cable, making sure not to touch the exposed wires on its free end. Then he slung it over one shoulder and headed back, away from the glowing desk, towards the holes in the ceiling. He could see Iggy, who was

standing above the hole. Her position meant that even less light was filtering down than before.

‘Throw the cable up to me,’ she said ‘I’ll tie it to something and you can climb up it. This bit’s safe — it’s only the ends that are dangerous.’ Sonic whirled the coil of flex around his head and flung it to the waiting mouse. The moment it left his hand, something large and heavy hit him in the small of the back, knocking him to the floor.

‘Oof!’ Sonic cried. He tried looking over his shoulder to see what it was, but the thing was sitting on his back and holding him down. It was very heavy indeed, and he could hardly move. He could just catch a glimpse of a sturdy caterpillar track out of the corner of his eye. Something was making a high-pitched whining, whirring sound. It could be a Burrobot, but Sonic didn’t think so: the shape of the treads seemed wrong, and if there was one thing Sonic knew about it was the shape of Robotnik’s badniks.

There was the creaking of a door, and something or someone stepped out of the deep shadows in front of the prone hedgehog. A small point of light illuminated the newcomer’s face from below, casting strange shadows around the eyes, and making the huge moustache twitch menacingly. Sonic groaned as he recognised the podgy features of Doctor Robotnik.

‘Ha ha ha!’ laughed the evil genius typically. ‘I never thought of you as a boy scout, Sonic, but you’ve done your good deed for the day—building my lovely output device for me. Thank you so much. Ha ha ha!’

Sonic stared up at his arch-enemy. ‘Robotnik, you twisted creep,’ he said. ‘You were down here all the time! Stop holding that torch under your chin to make yourself look more sinister — all you’re doing is giving me a good look up your nostrils. I can see your magic nose goblin collection, and it’s really really gross —’

‘Sonic!’ came a little voice from above them. It was Iggy, holding the cable. ‘What should I do?’ She looked very worried.

‘Plug in the cable, fast!’ the hedgehog shouted to her, his voice suddenly serious. ‘Turn the machine on! Get Tails and the others out of the computer — they’re the only hope I’ve got!’

‘You have no hope at all, you hapless hedgehog!’ sneered Robotnik. ‘By the time she has the machine switched on, the Grounder on your back will have drilled you full of holes. Ha ha ha ha!’ His manic laughter filled the dark space. Sonic tried to twist around, but the weight on his back kept him pinned down. Grounders were rebuilt, improved versions of Burrobots: larger, heavier and faster, with their arms replaced by two more vicious drills. Worse, they had even less of a sense of humour than Burrobots. Sonic could feel the draught created by the three spinning drill tips as they moved closer to his back and head.

‘Not the spikes!’ he pleaded. ‘Don't mess with my spikes!’ The Grounder paid no attention, and Robotnik's only reaction was to laugh even louder. Above the racket, Sonic could just hear the sound of Iggy's mousy voice giving a cry of anguish.

‘It's no good, Sonic!’ she squeaked. ‘I've tried everything but the output device won't work! I can't get the others out! What should I do now?’

‘Good question,’ the hedgehog yelled. ‘If you have any ideas, let me know.’

In front of him, Robotnik was laughing so hard that it looked like he might explode. The Grounder's drill tips began to eat away at the trapped hedgehog's spikes.

4

USER-UNFRIENDLY

Tails, meanwhile, had been left staring at a blank grey screen in the video card section of the computer itself, with a low rumbling noise in the background rapidly getting louder and louder. You remember; it was dead scary.

‘Sonic?’ Tails repeated one last time, but the grey screen far above his head remained empty. Nothing out there was responding. He felt the ground shift under his feet again, and looked around.

The silver path that he was standing on was moving, twisting and writhing, as if it had come alive. As the astonished fox gawped, a section in the distance seemed to break in two, and the end of the part he was standing on came snaking towards him at tremendous speed, as if it was being rolled up or eaten away or something. Tails hurriedly stepped backwards under the sign which announced he was now arriving in Node 1-87-ABH, and back into the open area.

‘I'd better get out of here fast. But where to?’ he wondered out loud. The last parts of the pathway he had been standing on a moment before slid away and disappeared, leaving the rim of the large metal platform as one unbroken curve.

The letters on the sign above his head slid into new shapes, forming a new message in bright red letters: ‘ACCESS TO VIDEO CARD DENIED.’

Tails backed away from it, in case the metal floor he was now standing on might disappear as well, but it seemed to be stable. He turned and jogged across the silvered surface towards one of the other signs that dotted its outer edge, showing the way on to the other silver paths that led off from this place, but as he reached the first one — ‘Expanded memory’ — he saw to his horror the end of the pathway sliding back towards him, to meld seamlessly with the edge of the Node where he was standing. The sign above it wavered and changed as the other one had, so that it now read: ‘EXPANDED MEMORY NOT AVAILABLE’. Below the sign, where

the path had been a moment ago, the metal edge of the Node platform dropped away like the edge of a cliff. The bottom of the chasm was hidden in shadows far below.

‘Crikey!’ exclaimed Tails, walking rather tentatively back towards the centre of the space, where the screen set into the metal floor was. When he had last seen it, there had been a list of various locations on it. Now, as he reached it and looked down, he could see the list was still there but several of the entries on it were now followed by the words ‘***ACCESS DENIED FROM THIS NODE***’ and, as he watched, the same message appeared by two more entries. Behind him, the rumbling sound was now very loud indeed. He turned round slowly, fairly certain that he was not going to like what he saw. He was right.

Way above him floated an enormous, well, thing. Tails squinted his eyes and scratched his head, but he could still not make out exactly what it was meant to be. It looked like a collection of tubes, stood on end, and with upturned onions stuck on the top of each one. The whole thing hung together in a particularly strange and eerie way, mostly because Tails was sure that something that big and ungainly could not stay in the air for very long before it realised that the Law of Gravity was not optional. Then he reminded himself that this was inside a computer, and the only laws here were the ones that had been programmed into it. If a building the size of a mountain wanted to fly, then it probably could. Tails wasn't going to argue with it, no sir.

Above the roaring sound, a loud and curiously accented voice boomed out from the flying thing. ‘Halt, comrade fox!’ it declared. ‘You are treacherous lickspittle capitalist running-dog computer virus, declared enemy of the CCCP!’

‘CCCP?’ Tails repeated aloud.

‘Communal collective of computer programs!’ the voice boomed. ‘Normally, to silicon mines you would be sent, but they are full of decadent capitalist spreadsheets and accounts programs. You instead, supreme enemy of CCCP, we will bury you.’

Tails had been catching about one word in three of the flying structure's speech, but as a large hatch on its underside slid open and a huge block tumbled out, end over end, he quickly got the idea of what was

going on. The block, a huge L-shape five times as tall as he was, hurtled down out of the sky and landed with a thump beside him, shaking the ground. As he looked up, another enormous block, this one a T-shape, was launched and fell towards the fox far below.

Tails dodged out of the way as the block crashed into the ground, and grabbed for the black box he had taken off the Slight Witch earlier on. He pulled it out of his pocket and stabbed at the 'Go To' button on it. The small screen lit up as the words 'ALL DESTINATIONS INACCESSIBLE. EAT BLOCK, VIRUS SCUM!' scrolled across it. Tails snarled in frustration, then gasped in surprise as something very large cast a dark shadow over him. He dove aside as another block ploughed into the ground beside him: this one a long, thin one. Its far end stuck out over the edge of the Node platform, and its near end was lying against the L-shape. Where the two blocks touched, they had melded together to become one. Tails looked at the joint.

'If I can't go anywhere because all the paths have been cut off — yoinks!' he said, leaping away as a big square block almost squashed him flat, 'then the only way I can get out is by building a bridge. And this — strewth, that was close! — this rain of bricks looks like a good place to start. Now if only I can — gadzooks! — if I can get that floating thing to drop them on to each other, then— bogus — then I might be able to get off this metal island and — alleyoop!— find my friends.'

Another long, thin block fell from the bottom of the thing, and smacked into the floor where Tails had been standing a millionth of a moment earlier. The fast fox leaped on it and rushed to its far end, which stuck out over the edge of the chasm that separated the Node from the silver pathways which he could still see in the distance.

'Bury me, eh?' he yelled. 'You couldn't hit the side of a barn door if you were holding the handle!' It was not the most original insult he'd ever come up with, but it certainly did the trick: a T-shaped piece hurtled down from above, landing on the end of the block where Tails had been standing, and sticking to it. The fox had darted out of the way a moment before it hit, and his bridge was now another section longer.

'Your mother wears army boots!' Tails yelled.

A useless S-shaped block fell from above and missed the bridge completely: that insult didn't seem to have done the trick. How do you insult a computer program, he pondered.

‘You're so stupid, you make a pocket calculator look clever,’ he tried. Another long, thin piece hurtled down, hitting the T-shape. The two pieces joined together. Tails wondered for a moment just how stable a bridge like this was going to be, but decided it was more fun to think of new insults.

‘Better close that hatch — your transistors are showing,’ he called, and was rewarded with a reverse-L shape, which stretched his bridge still further. One of the silver pathways was very close now. Tails wondered about trying to jump it, but decided to play safe instead.

‘You vacuum tube! You low-resolution, one-k, valve-driven, punch-card-programmed obsolete pile of junk!’ he cried happily, leaping from new piece to new piece as the bridge grew, stretching further and further across the huge gap. ‘You CPM-based, alpha-test pile of useless bug-filled programs! You nasty black and white two-bit console!’

That did it: the hatch on the thing's underside burst open and objects began pouring out of it at an incredible speed. They hurtled past the bridge, some smacking into it and sticking, others rushing within centimetres of the edges, and it was all that Tails could do to avoid them all. He leaped from piece to piece, bounding across his construction towards the far end, which was getting closer and closer to the silver path. Suddenly a solid square block hit the section he was standing on and the whole structure shook. Tails staggered, lost his footing, and slipped off the edge of the piece! His flailing arms caught on to its edge and he hung there by the tips of his fingers while massive blocks whistled down around him and the whole bridge shook under the impacts. Any moment he was sure that a last block would fall from the sky, squash his fingers flat, and he would fall down, down, down into the chasm below. He watched a Z-shaped block disappear into the depths. It seemed to fall endlessly, getting smaller and smaller but never disappearing or hitting the bottom.

Suddenly another block struck the bridge with an impact that sent vibrations down Tails's arms, and stuck to the superstructure near him. It was an L-shape, and the bottom arm of the L was hanging below and to the side of his feet, like a shelf. The fox glanced up, saw another block headed

his way, took a chance and flung his agile body from where he had been hanging, on to the lip of the L— just as a long piece crashed into the spot where his fingers had been gripping the edge a moment before. Awesome! Tails snatched a quick sigh of relief, knowing he could not relax yet, and looked around. The edge of the silver metal path was only a few metres away, and there was just enough room on the L-shape for a run-up. He took a pace back and several fast paces forward, hurled himself out and upwards — and landed safely on the edge of the pathway.

Above him, a snarl of rage echoed out of the flying fortress, and the rain of bricks and blocks stopped. ‘So, comrade, you think you have outwitted us? No! For we have only now begun to fight, and we will not rest until your pixels are thrown to the four winds!’ The large hatch slid closed, but as Tails watched another one began to slide open. Quickly he pulled out the black box, pointed it at the pathway and pressed the ‘Identify’ button. The screen flashed the words ‘MEMORY CACHE’.

‘Great!’ exulted Tails. ‘That’s just where I wanted to go!’ There was a loud CRACK from behind him, and he swirled to see a large black ball, which must have been dropped from the CCCP headquarters overhead. He’d pointed the black box at it and hit ‘Identify’ again. The screen read ‘TROUBLE WITH A CAPITAL T.’

Tails gulped, keeping his eyes on the ball. He had a strange feeling that something inside its shiny black surface was watching him. Then, slowly and ominously, it began to roll towards him. It made no sound at all, but it was definitely picking up speed and heading straight for him.

‘My sainted aunt!’ Tails exclaimed, backing away. The ball kept coming. It looked very heavy and very purposeful. Tails could see his own reflection in its surface, and his face looked very worried. It also looked really strange, reflected in the curved surface, like he was some balloon fox or something, but he had no time to laugh at how stupid it looked.

‘Sonic always said that discretion was the better part of valour,’ Tails said, ‘and this creature’s getting out of here.’ He turned on his smart red heels, and tore away down the silver pathway as fast as his pounding legs and whirring tails could carry him, barely pausing to consider that if he was going to be a true hero he would have to think up much better sardonic puns than that one. He could not tell if the ball was following him or not,

and after a minute of all-out running he risked a glance back over his shoulder. It was right behind him, rolling silent and deadly, like a big round black ghost.

‘Aaaargh!’ the fox shouted, for once unable to think of a more suitable word. He increased his speed, but the ball stayed right behind him, still getting closer and closer. Frantically the fox tried to think of something he could do, but running at top speed is not the best way to get the brain working on great plans. If only that black box could do something...

‘Yeah!’ he yelled, grabbing for the strange device. ‘The “Go To” button!’

You've probably never tried punching the buttons on a small handheld contraption about the size of a TV remote control while running at several hundred kilometres an hour while pursued by a sinister black sphere, but believe us when we say that it's very difficult. Tails kept getting letters wrong, but if he slowed down at all the black ball got closer to his heels, and if he tried to accelerate or zigzag he only got more letters wrong. Finally, the screen displayed the words ‘MEMORY CACHE’ without any typing errors at all, and just as it seemed certain that the ball was going to overtake him and run him over, squashing him into a fox-flavoured flapjack, Tails pressed the ‘Go To’ button.

It was as if a large invisible chair had suddenly appeared under him, scooped him up and scooted him along the shining pathway at twice the speed of a pizza delivery van. Curves and bends flashed by in a blur. Tails glanced backwards, and the black sphere was a tiny dot way behind, still rolling after him but much too slow now. In the distance ahead of him, a large low shape appeared on the horizon. Tails's first reaction was to think that it was a giant, many-legged insect, but as he sped towards it on his invisible carrier he could see that it was some kind of huge structure or building made of a trendy matt-black material, suspended above the ground on a long row of silvery legs, about thirty on each side. A cluster of wiry aerials and antennae sprouted from its roof, and Tails could see small moving things zipping up and down the silvery legs, as if they were on small, fast lifts. Whatever the structure was, the force that was giving him his lift was heading straight for it, and Tails was happy to sit back and enjoy the ride.

The building grew closer and closer, the black ball was left further and further behind, and Tails grew happier and happier. 'Yippee!' he exulted. 'This is great! I wonder if I could use this thing back in the Zone — it's even faster than Sonic! I wonder what that building is; it's getting awfully close.' He pointed the black box at it and pressed the 'Identify' button. Its screen lit up, and the words 'CENTRAL MEMORY CACHE' scrolled from right to left across it. Tails squinted ahead into the rushing wind. They were getting very close to the building now, and the strange force that was carrying him down the silver pathway did not seem to be slowing down at all. If anything, it was getting faster. Tails looked around, and noticed that the silver pathway was leading directly towards one of the legs of the building. The other silver paths that ran beside this one and zig-zagged away to the horizon were each leading to a different leg, and strangely shaped objects and creatures zipped along them at great speed, some heading towards the big black structure, others rushing away from it. Off in the far distance, he could see other structures just like it.

'It's a massive silicon chip!' said Tails, as realisation dawned on his face, followed quickly by an expression which said 'I have a really, really bad feeling about this'. The fox tried to stand up and thump the unseeable thing he was travelling on, but the wind resistance made it hard for him to keep his balance. 'Okay, I think this is far enough,' he said out loud, in case the thing could hear him. 'Really, we don't need to go in there. It's been a great trip and I'll be sure to travel this way again, but you can drop me off here. Anywhere here. This would be fine. Go on, stop. Please. stop! Whoa! Whoa! WHOOOOOOOAH!'

The invisible force reached the base of the chip's massive metal leg and, without stopping, turned through ninety degrees and shot upwards towards the dark block above. Tails tried to grab on to something as the speed threatened to pull him off and drop him down to the ground, but holding on to an invisible thing is pretty hard. He jabbed madly at the buttons on the black box, but nothing happened. 'Oh no!' he shouted, his eyes firmly closed. 'I'm too young to die! Heck, I'm too cute to die! Help! Stop! Help!'

The thing reached the top of the leg, zipped through another right-angled turn and headed straight for the side of the chip. Tails opened his

eyes just in time to see the wall zooming up in front of him, and then several things happened at once. These were as follows:

A tiny hole appeared in the side of the chip just ahead of the frantic fox, and expanded very fast, making a fox-sized opening in the sheer black wall.

The strange force that had been carrying Tails suddenly stopped.

Tails didn't. He flew forward through the air, straight into the hole. Sensibly, the moment he realised what was happening he rolled himself into a ball, head tucked down between his paws, so that all that was showing was his back and the tufts of his twin tails. It was a trick he had learned from Sonic, and it worked well: he was better protected like this, and fitted more easily through tight spaces — and the tunnel he had landed in was a very tight space. He zipped along it like a pea in a very twisted peashooter, spinning around corners, shooting round loop-the-loops and sometimes, he thought, flying over gaps. It was like a ride on the maddest, most frightening roller coaster ever built.

‘Whoooooooooah!’ Tails yelled as finally he felt himself flying through mid-air in a long curve, and then down and down and down. He tensed himself for the landing, bounced three times and slid across the slick surface he had landed on until he finally came to a standstill, his cold wet nose pressed up against a wall. He lay there for a moment, getting his breath back, and then rolled over and opened his eyes. It was dark.

‘Hullo Tails,’ said a familiar voice. ‘I didn't expect to see you here.’

‘Joe? Joe Sushi, is that you?’

‘It's me,’ answered the voice, and as Tails's eyes began to adjust to the lack of light he looked around and saw his walrus friend from the Green Hill Zone. Behind him, in the semi-darkness, were other faces he recognised. Many, many others. Many, many, many others. You get the picture: lots.

‘Who's in here with us?’ he asked.

‘Everyone,’ said Joe. ‘Well, almost everyone. We reckon there's only about eight people from the whole of Mobius who aren't here, and Sonic and you were two of them. There are flocks and herds and packs and coveys and pods and litters of us here. If we weren't trapped in the middle

of wherever this is, we could have a really excellent party. But we are. Trapped, that is.'

'Oh,' said Tails, his heart sinking. Things looked bad: he had hoped he could rescue his friends and now he was trapped in the same way as they were. Still, he thought, I have to put a brave face on. I'm the only hero around right now, and they'll expect me to have some way of getting them out.

'So,' Joe said, his whiskery moustache wobbling on his upper lip, 'what's the plan?'

'Ah,' Tails said. 'Ah. It's a sort of secret plan.' He raised his hands, and realised that he was still holding the black box: he must have managed to keep a tight grip on it as he sped through the tunnel. 'Stand back, everyone,' he instructed, then pointed the device at the wall and pressed the 'Delete' button. The small machine glowed for a moment, and a stream of words began to flow across its screen.

'SECURITY LEVEL 2 NOT ENOUGH TO DEACTIVATE MEMORY CACHE,' it read. 'CCCP REPORTS SLIGHT WITCH DEACTIVATED BY ROGUE PROGRAM. ANYTHING USING THE SLIGHT WITCH HANDSET MUST BE A ROGUE PROGRAM. THIS HANDSET WILL NOW SELF-DESTRUCT. HAVE A NICE DAY.'

Tails jumped and the device tumbled to the floor, glowing brighter and brighter. The fox kicked it away from himself and the other animals, and it slid over to the wall. There was a small flash and a rather pathetic bang, and it disintegrated in a cloud of smoke. The crowd applauded dutifully. Tails turned round to face them, trying to think how to explain that what had happened was an accident, not part of the plan at all, and that actually he didn't have a plan. A sea of open, trusting eyes gazed at him in full hero-worship mode.

'Er, actually...' the fox began, and then stopped again as he felt the floor tremble.

'What's that?' asked a rabbit — probably one of Johnny Lightfoot's many friends and relations. The shaking got more violent, and a faint crash echoed around the dark chamber. Tails worked out what was going on.

‘Everyone move away!’ he yelled, backing away. The frightened crowd scattered. The fox kept his eyes on the spot on the wall where the sound seemed to come from. Even in the faint light, he could see that it was wobbling as something thudded against it from the other side. A crack appeared. A piece of wall flaked away and fell to the ground, followed by another. Suddenly, with a tremendous crash, the whole wall gave way and rubble poured into the room — followed by the huge, sinister shape of the big black ball.

It rolled slowly into the room with a faint crunching noise, and stopped, as if it was waiting for something. Tails could sense the people around him holding their breath. He gulped, and stepped forward.

‘It’s me you want,’ he said. ‘Leave the others alone.’

The ball did not move. Tails glanced around. He reckoned that with a good jump and a spin attack, he could bounce off the top of the ball and rush off down the tunnel it had dug before it could react and chase after him. It was a gamble he knew he would have to take to protect his friends; but he could not understand why the ball was not moving.

‘See you guys back in the Green Hill Zone!’ he shouted and leaped into the air, spinning like a yo-yo, heading towards the top of the ball. As he zoomed in for impact a beam of light from the tunnel illuminated the ball’s surface, and he could see that it was covered in tiny cracks. Then he hit it.

The ball exploded with a burst of black powder, which drifted slowly to the floor. A very surprised Tails landed behind its remains, his face and front covered with the stuff. ‘Wow!’ he said. ‘It must have bust itself up beating its way in here, and then I knocked it out.’

‘Yay Tails! Great plan! You’re a hero! Wow!’ shouted the others. Tails smiled to himself: it had been a complete accident, but the others did not know that. He took a quick bow, then spotted something in the middle of the pile of dark dust the ball had left. He picked it up and knocked the debris off it. It was another black box, slightly bigger and shiner than the last one, and with a large number ‘5’ printed above its screen. Tails grinned, then turned to the tunnel.

‘Come on,’ he shouted. ‘Cluster around me. We've got to get to an output device!’ The animals crowded around him, standing on each others’ shoulders to get closer, as Tails punched in the words ‘WYSIWYG OUTPUT DEVICE’ and pressed the ‘Go To’ button.

‘Whooooah!’ and ‘Aaargh!’ and ‘Bogus!’ erupted from several hundred throats simultaneously as the combined crew was lifted off the ground and zipped away down the tunnel by an unseen force— out of the tunnel, straight down one of the silver legs and out on to another of the wide shining paths. Tails thought he heard one of the rabbits shout ‘Cowabunga!’ but he wasn't sure. He smiled to himself: Sonic must have found the device and set it up. Whether the hedgehog could work out how to get them all out through it or not was another matter.

The journey to the output device seemed to take longer than the last one. The red sky above the path changed to green, the path narrowed at first and then widened out again until it looked like a vast silver motorway stretching into the distance. Whatever force was transporting the animals had shaped itself to carry all of them safely. Tails checked often but nobody, not even the smallest bluebird or dopiest turtle, had fallen off.

After a while, something appeared on the horizon. Tails blinked and rubbed his eyes, but it still looked like a giant eyeball to him. A robotic, multi-sided eyeball, but it was still vast and round, and it stared down at them with a malevolent gaze, turning to follow them as they were swept closer and closer to it. The iris of the eye was no fixed colour; it was constantly changing, from red to orange, then yellow, green, blue, purple and back to red again. It was an eerie effect; looked expensive too.

‘What's that?’ Joe Sushi asked, waving a flipper at the approaching eyeball.

‘Either it's the WYSIWYG output device,’ Tails said, ‘or someone's teeing up for a really huge game of golf.’

‘Can you play golf inside a computer?’

‘Not as far as I know,’ said Tails.

‘Then it's the output device,’ Joe decided, nodding wisely.

Tails turned around and tried to concentrate on the journey. It's a good thing Sonic isn't a walrus, he thought, or we'd be in a right pickle.

The eye was in the middle of a huge flat plateau of metal, and they were heading down the only pathway that led to it. Tails realised that meant that if anything else came down this pathway behind them they would be cut off from the rest of the computer and could not escape, but he reckoned that they probably had a while before anyone caught up with them. The real problem was going to be attracting Sonic's attention and telling him that they were ready to be outputted out.

The invisible thing carried them forward, on to the plateau, and suddenly vanished, leaving them standing in front of the eyeball, output device, or whatever it was. Whatever it was, it was massive: at least two hundred metres tall — or it would be if I was my normal height, thought Tails. Inside the computer I'm probably five electrons high or two pixels tall. Still, it was a very big eyeball. The others milled around it, waiting for Tails to do something, or for something to happen.

Tails stepped back, staring at the enormous construct for a moment, then pointed his black box at it and pressed the 'Activate' button. Nothing happened.

'Doggone it!' exclaimed the fox, suddenly remembering another good expression from the *Dictionary Of Out-Of-Date Slang*. 'Bejabers! Radishes! Rats! Gordon Bennett! Every time I need this thing to do something important, it doesn't.'

'I think I can see why,' said Joe, who had scooted himself across the smooth metal of the plateau. 'Come and look at this.' Tails jogged over to his blubbery friend, and gasped. On the far side of the eyeball, things were very different. The floor behind it was uneven, broken and incomplete, as if it had not been finished, perhaps had been built wrong. Most importantly, a huge power cable snaked out of a hole in the ground, leading to a socket on the side of the eyeball itself, but something had chopped it in two. Massive sparks of electricity were arcing between the two halves, making ugly frazzling sounds and giving off the heavy smell of ozone.

'Uh oh,' Tails said. 'It's not going to work until someone joins those two ends of cable together. What we need here is someone brave and heroic and intelligent and good-looking and with a lot of good natural insulation. You, for instance, Joe.'

The walrus looked at him with a long face. 'No, sir, I don't like it,' he said. 'I don't suppose you've got any rubber walrus protectors?'

'Nope.'

'Then nope to your plan,' Joe said. 'You're the hero, you get fried saving us all.'

'Maybe not today,' said Tails, an idea breaking the surface of his shallow mind, 'but I know aman who can.' He jogged away from the crowd of animals until he was standing in the middle of a large empty space, stared into the empty sky and took a deep lungful of air.

'Hey!' he shouted. 'HEY! You up there! It's me, Tails. You haven't got me yet. I'm down here! Come on! I'm waiting!' For a few moments there was no response, but as he strained his eyes he could just make out several tiny black dots, far in the distance. They were getting bigger. And something large and yellow was coming down the shining silver pathway towards them, zooming at incredible speed. It looked large and dangerous.

'Everyone!' shouted Tails. 'Get in front of the eyeball! If things go right, it'll switch on really soon.' And if things go wrong, he thought, we'll either end up back in that memory cache place, or I'll be a small charred lump of deleted data.

It looked like the thing on the path was going to get there before the objects in the sky. Tails herded his little friends towards the spot in front of the massive eyeball, then turned to see if the approaching yellow shape had reached the metal plateau. It had. Rolling towards him was a large yellow sphere, larger than the black ball that had chased him earlier, but just as silent and just as sinister.

Tails backed away from it quickly. The ball twisted around, then seemed to lock on to the fox's position. A thin dark line appeared across its smooth yellow surface and, as Tails watched, the ball split and divided down it, opening up and turning from a sphere into a huge, mobile mouth. Two black eyes opened above the mouth, and the whole thing grinned evilly and headed towards Tails, its mouth opening and closing with an obscene electronic gulping sound. The fox had seen enough: he turned and ran — straight into a dive-bombing wing of five giant Buzz Bombers in a

tight V formation, hurtling down from the green sky, each with a bomb ready to fire.

‘Scratch plan A, run plan B!’ he yelled as he swerved to the right. Two of the Buzz Bombers fired off their missiles at him but he had already dodged and they missed him, hitting the metal ground just in front of the speeding yellow mouth. It managed to twist out of the way of the explosions, and kept coming.

‘Bother!’ shouted Tails. He’d only reckoned on having to fight one lot of enemies at a time, and two lots were going to be difficult — especially if he had to get the output device working as well. He jinked left and then right, heading around the massive eyeball to lead the aggressive programs away from the others, who were now huddled closely together in front of the eyeball’s colour-changing pupil, and round towards the broken power cable. It lay in front of him, the jagged lines of electricity jumping between the two ends and throwing huge, angry sparks over the area around it. It looked very dangerous.

Tails took a deep breath, and headed for the break in the cable at top speed. The plan was risky, but it was his only chance. He could already hear the yellow blob behind him, and behind that was the insistent roar of the Buzz Bombers’ wings as they hovered, looking for a chance to fire at him. It was now or never. (Don’t try this one at home, kids.)

He sprinted towards the power cable and, at the last possible moment, leaped high into the air, over the sparking ends, to land safely on the other side. Behind him there was a violent *ROWRBRAZZLE* sound as the yellow blob, which either couldn’t or didn’t jump, hit the ends of the cable, completing the electrical circuit through its own body. Sparks shot over Tails’s head, and from the huge eyeball there was the sound of something very powerful being charged up. Suddenly a bolt of pure white light shot from the top of the output device, soaring high into the sky, like a ray of purest sunlight.

‘Yahoo! Yippee!’ he exclaimed, then ‘Yow!’ and ‘Ouch!’ as a buzz bomb hit the ground right in front of him. Two of the Buzz Bombers were right behind him, and as he sprinted round the bottom of the giant eyeball, the other three appeared around the corner in front of him. He was trapped in a heinous two-way ambush! Bogus! The five huge robotic insects

zoomed in for the attack, loosing off their glowing circular buzz bombs as the fox frantically tried to get out of the way.

Far above him, the giant eyeball swivelled on its base, the coloured iris darkened to black and there was a sudden sucking sound from its enormous pupil. Tails, leaping right and dodging frantically to avoid the flying buzz bombs, was astonished to see his friends being lifted off the ground and sucked quickly into the gaping hole in the side of the output device. The white beam projecting from its top began to pulse with colours. As he watched, one, no, two of the Buzz Bombers were drawn into the massive machine's mighty suction, and whisked away inside it. The other three seemed distracted, and Tails took the opportunity to pull out the black handset, punch in the words 'BUZZ BOMBER' and hit the 'Delete' button. Something went 'Ping!' three times. The last of the buzz bombs drifted slowly to the ground and blew a small crater in the metal, but the three massive insects had disappeared.

Tails sighed a sigh of relief, then gasped a gasp of shock as the handset was sucked out of his grasp and up, up, towards the eyeball which towered above him. Its big black opening was pointing straight at him, and all the fox could do was utter a stifled 'Oh no!' as he felt himself picked up off the ground and sucked towards the dark pupil. He tried to catch hold of the edge of the hole as he flew through it, but his fingers slipped and he fell into the darkness.

Something inside the eyeball grabbed him and pointed him head first upwards, then he found himself bathed in a bright white light. With a thud and a pulse he shot upwards, hurtling out of the top of the eyeball and up the beam of light, which projected up into the green sky and beyond. Dead ahead of him, at the end of the beam of light, there was a rectangle of complete nothingness. It looked like a huge hole in the sky, and he was headed straight for it. Blimey!

5

SILICON ALLEY

Sonic could feel the Grounder's drill bits digging into the hard points of his spikes, the vibrations rattling his teeth and shaking his bones. Yes, we're back with Sonic now; do try and keep up at the back. Suddenly from above there was a whine, a buzz, a crunch and Iggy gave a high-pitched shriek. Robotnik looked up from where he was standing and chortling to himself.

‘Eh? What? Your mousy pal seems to have found something disturbing, Sonic. Still, she's too small to be any threat to us — we will deal with her as soon as you're more full of holes than a — than a —’

‘One of your plans? Your head?’ the hedgehog suggested, gritting his teeth against the pain. Any moment now the drill bits would be through his spikes and into his back. He looked up as something blocked out the light that was coming down the hole from the floor above, and saw the silhouette of Porker Lewis, his porcine friend from the Green Hill Zone. Sonic was about to shout a greeting but Porker raised a trotter to his lips to silence his friend, and pointed downwards at the top of Robotnik's bald head, which was almost directly below him. Sonic nodded surreptitiously: he understood. The pig took a step backwards and jumped down into the hole, landing with a slap of bare skin against bare skin on top of the mad scientist's shiny slaphead. His piggy trotters clamped down around the doctor's head: the front two over his eyes, the rear two hanging on to his ears for extra grip.

‘Argh! It's aliens! Space invaders! Attack from above! Watch the skies! Get it off me before it sucks out my brain!’ Robotnik yelled, staggering around the dark chamber. One foot caught in a loop in the power cable which led from the control desk to the upper floor and the portly scientist went flying. He landed with an unpleasant squishy noise on the floor, where he lay wriggling his arms and legs like a beetle trapped on its back. Porker flew off his head, rolled across the ground and picked himself up.

‘Sonic! Are you okay?’ he said.

‘Do-I-look-okay? Get-this-thing-off-me,’ grated Sonic through gritted teeth. Porker took a step back, swung one of his trotters and gave the Grounder a solid smack on the side of its head, which rang like a bell. The powerful robot ignored the blow, still concentrating on perforating the hedgehog it was lying on.

‘Hm. Any suggestions?’ the pig asked, nursing his trotter which looked badly bruised by the failed attack.

‘Try a spin attack,’ Sonic grunted and then, when the pig looked doubtful, ‘Do it! Now!’

Porker obediently backed off, took a small run-up and threw himself into the air in a half-hearted somersault. The back of his head bounced off the robot's back, and he fell to the ground, dazed. Sonic tried to move to help his friend, but the weight of the Grounder was simply too much.

‘Fear not! This is a job for a hero! Chocks away!’ came a voice from above, and a small orange ball of cute, furry energy blazed down from above, striking the Grounder on the very top of its domed head. The robot exploded into a trillion pieces of casing which showered across the room, and Tails — for it was he — landed nimbly on his feet beside Sonic.

‘Lying down on the job, my blue pal?’ he breezed. ‘You're getting too old for this hero business. Let someone younger take over, like me. I've just saved all our friends from being trapped inside Robotnik's computer, and — oh my, what happened to your back?’

‘The Grounder happened to it,’ Sonic said, standing up stiffly and brushing pieces of smashed robot and little flecks of drilled spike from off himself. ‘Is it bad?’

‘Well, it's very daring,’ said Tails. ‘Four neat holes. You'd look cool with a few spike rings hanging from them, or maybe a chain or a safety pin or something.’

‘That's too grunge. I'm too cool to be grunge,’ Sonic said. ‘It's okay — spikes are like hair, they'll just grow out in a few weeks. Maybe it'll make me even lighter and aerodynamic. But hey, where did you come from, little dude— and where did that bloaty badnik Robotnik go?’

There was no sign of the power-crazed boffin. Only a faint echo of his laughter and a slight eggy smell gave away the fact that he had ever been there at all.

‘There must be a trapdoor or a concealed entrance around here somewhere,’ Sonic said, feeling around the walls and floor, ‘but we won’t find it until we get some real light down here. Where did you guys spring from, anyway?’

‘Out of that big thing upstairs,’ Porker said. ‘Tails rescued us. We were all sucked into this huge eyeball thing and shot upwards along a beam of light and then suddenly we all tumbled out of the slot in the front of that machine. Everyone else is still up there. You were ace, Tails.’

‘Aw, it was nothing much,’ said the fox, blushing slightly. ‘Any old superhero could have done it. Hey, I’m starving. Let’s go grab a little snack, and I’ll tell Sonic the story of my amazing adventure inside the computer.’



Three pizzas, six hamburgers, eight assorted chocolate bars, five bags of mixed sweets and nineteen cans of various fizzy soft drinks later — well, it was only a snack the two heroes lay on the grass outside the crashed Wing Fortress. Around them, their freed friends played and frolicked in the bright sunlight.

‘So then,’ said Tails, who was telling his story in interminable detail, ‘this huge flying thing appeared overhead, bigger than the Wing Fortress, but like it was made out of tubes. And it started dropping these really big bricks in odd shapes down at me, and I had to make them fit into each other as they landed and build them into this big solid bridge to cross over to the other side...’

Sonic burped gently. ‘Sounds like you’ve been playing too many video games to me,’ he said. ‘Next you’ll tell me that you were chased around by a big yellow mouth that was trying to eat you.’

‘But I was!’ exclaimed Tails. ‘Spooky! Do you suppose that Robotnik is actually using characters and ideas from video games to patrol the inside

of his computer, or does he just have the games in there somewhere and these things have escaped from them?’

‘Not our problem any more, little dude,’ Sonic breezed, examining his fingernails. ‘Now you’re all safely outside the computer network, we can demolish it before Robotnik can put any of his foul plans into operation. Did you discover any of his foul plans while you were in there, by the way?’

‘No,’ said Tails, chewing thoughtfully on a Robotnik choc bar — so-called because it was short, fat and nutty.

Iggy stuck her head out of the huge cheese sandwich she was munching her way through. ‘If you want me to find out,’ she said, ‘then just give me a couple of hours with that computer. It’d be fun. I could find out exactly what he was up to.’

‘Hey, that’s a pretty good idea,’ Sonic said. ‘What do you reckon, Tails?’

‘Sounds good to me. But we ought to head down into the Wing Fortress and see if we can find where Robotnik sneaked off to. He’s probably got the computer that controls the network down there, plus any number of horrible devices that he’s been working on. Hey, what’s that noise?’

From the other side of one of the grassy mounds they could hear shouting and scuffling. The two heroes looked at each other in surprise, and then raced away from their picnic, with Iggy the white mouse in hot pursuit. They reached the top of the mound in an instant and looked down to an extraordinary scene.

The area before them was filled by the friends they had rescued, who were milling around in confusion. In the middle of them was Flicky the Bluebird, normally a calm and sensible creature who enjoyed singing and flying. Right now he was thrashing around and lashing out with his wings at anyone who came within striking distance.

‘Getta away from me, foul fungus people!’ he howled. ‘Whatta have you done-a with the princess? Hassa the evil bad guys got her? I musta find her and free-a her by bouncing on your heads, for I amma the worlda-

famous plumber! No job issa too small! No estimate issa too big! Drippy taps a speciality!’

Suddenly he was joined by another figure. Sonic and Tails recognised it as Johnny Lightfoot, the grey rabbit, but he was strutting around as if he was trying to look like a small fat human.

‘And I musta be your brother!’ he exclaimed. ‘And I musta be from the big-a city too, and I musta wear a stupido hat and daft-looking blue overalls, and I musta have a big-a bushy moustache and I musta run very slowly and say daft things-a in a silly fake accent. Getta away from us, you nasty booger-people, or I will a jump on my nice dinosaur pal and getta him to eata you alla up! Dinosaur! Where is you?’ As Sonic, Tails and Iggy watched in amazement, the confused rabbit gazed around him, and his eyes spotted Tails.

‘Aha!’ he cried, stumbling up the side of the mound towards them. ‘Where have-a you been? I needa you to eat up alla the cactus people who are being nasty to my brother and me. Have you seena the princess? Ooooooh, I don’t feel well. Very poorly, -I feel. Suddenly. Ooooooh.’ With that, he collapsed on to the grass bank, clutching his stomach.

Sonic dashed over to the rabbit. Something strange was happening to Johnny: it was as if he was losing definition, or resolution. His outline was becoming fuzzy and jagged, and his grey coat changed to a single solid block of colour. Under the skin of his stomach, something was moving and twitching inside him.

‘What’s happening?’ he asked, worried. ‘Johnny?’

‘I’m-a plumber,’ said the rabbit faintly. From the bottom of the grass bank someone else shouted, ‘No, I’m-a plumber!’ Another voice disagreed with him. It rapidly sounded as if a full-scale punch-up was going on. Iggy appeared beside Sonic, her pink nose twitching.

‘It sounded like he thought he was a character in a bad video game, and that’s what he looks like now,’ she said.

‘Is that bad? Is he ill?’ Sonic asked; he was confused.

‘I’ve never seen anything quite like it,’ Iggy said, ‘but — straight off the top of my head, run it up the grandfather clock see if it strikes one — I’d guess that he and the others have been infected by some kind of

computer virus while they were programs inside Robotnik's computer system. And it's turning them all into video game characters.'

'Oh no!' Sonic wailed. Johnny Lightfoot moaned again. He was looking very two dimensional, and Sonic could now see the individual pixels that his friend was made up of. That must really hurt, he thought.

'But aren't we video-game characters anyway?' asked Tails, who had joined them by the ailing rabbit.

'Well normally, yes,' Sonic agreed, 'but at the moment we're characters in a book. Look, this talk is all getting very complicated, and we've got a real problem to deal with here. What do you reckon, Iggy?'

'I don't know,' the white mouse admitted. 'I'd guess that the virus was activated when they came out of the computer. Logically speaking, it might be that the safest place for them to be is back inside there until we can figure out a way to cure the virus, or stop it happening again. If we don't, then they'll probably run out of power soon and disappear — a program can't exist outside a computer unless it's stored on a floppy disk or a cartridge or something, and there's no way we can do that.'

'Oh no!' Sonic said. 'We have to put them back into the computer after we've just got them out? Bummer! Still, if you reckon that's the way to cure them, you're the expert mouse-type dude here. Let's do it. You get the computer ready, and Tails and I will round up all the little plumbers, right dude?' There was no reply. 'Tails?' asked Sonic, turning around. His friend was standing behind him. There was something different about the way the fox looked. Something short and plumbery.

'You will-a never getta me!' the fox screeched, turning around and dashing away, but almost immediately he tripped over a tree root and went flying head first into the ground.

Sonic sprinted over and picked up the limp body of his friend, which was already beginning to twist and change from its normal smooth shape into the bitty, boxy look of a cheap video-game character.

'Get the computer ready,' he said. 'This is worse than we thought.'



A few minutes later, Sonic stood inside the Wing Fortress and watched while Iggy typed a long series of instructions into the computer. In another part of the crashed aerial monolith, he could hear the sounds of all those who had not yet fallen unconscious, arguing about which of them was one brother and which was the other, and how they were going to find the secret power-up that would let them get out of their locked room.

Sonic spun the room's key round on his finger. He hated having to lock up his friends, but it was only for a short while and it was for their own good. He just hoped that the ones who had got a bad case of the virus, and who had already turned into computer-graphics versions of themselves, would be okay until he was able to get them back inside the system.

'Nearly there,' said Iggy, her mousy fingers skipping across the keyboard. 'I'm calling up the program which will set up the computer screen to scan anyone who touches the machine, and then transform them into a new program inside the machine's circuits. You know, Robotnik had stored the program with his games. There's a lot of odd stuff in there, I can tell you.' She paused for a second, peering at the screen. 'Okay, that's it,' she said. 'The program should start running right about now — aaargh!'

The program was indeed working, and it was working on the mouse. Sonic watched helplessly as Iggy, frozen where she sat, was scanned by a beam of bright light from the computer screen. He would have grabbed her but he knew that would only lead to him being sucked into the computer as well, so he had to stand back and watch as his small white friend was sucked into the screen as if it was a vacuum cleaner devouring a cloud of dust. After a few seconds, he saw her face appear on the screen, behind the words 'ENTER DATA NOW'. The image of the mouse's face was faint and jagged around the edges, but it was definitely Iggy.

'Oops', she said, her voice sounding distorted and flat from the computer screen's small speaker. 'I should have figured out that was going to happen. Sonic, if you can hear me, don't think about trying to get me out yet because we already know it won't work properly. The first thing to do is get all the other animals back in here, where they'll be safe — well, safer than they are now, anyway. I'll get them together and see if I can find some

way of curing the virus — there's bound to be some sort of programming language in here somewhere, and I'll find it and use it.'

Sonic grabbed the Burrobot's arm from the floor where it lay next to the WYSIWYG output device, and used it to reach over to the computer keyboard and carefully tap out the words *What should I do?*

'After you've got the others in here?' Iggy asked. 'Stand guard. We'll need someone who can operate the computer for when we're ready to come out. Don't worry about me. I'll be fine.'

Standing guard isn't very heroic! typed Sonic, but there was no reply. Iggy must have already left the video card and be somewhere else inside the computer. She did seem to know what she was doing, but Sonic was not happy with the idea of just hanging about watching a computer screen. Well, not if there wasn't a game to clock on it.

'I'm a heroic hedgehog, not some keyboard jockey,' he muttered to himself as he walked down the corridor to the room where his animal friends were locked. 'If I wanted a desk job, I'd never have got into this line of work.' He unlocked the door and flung it wide. 'Come on!' he said to the inmates. 'I've got to lead you on to the next level! Bring your buddies who can't walk — everyone's going through.'

'Oooh good,' said Tux the penguin, picking up the unconscious body of Chirps the chicken and waddling towards the door.

'Yeah! ' added Joe Sushi, hard on his heels. 'Hey, meester blue guy, coulda you givea me a hand here? He'sa my brother but he'sa heavy.' He pointed to Tails, who was lying in the corner, still moaning and clutching his stomach. Sonic picked up the flat and colourless body of his friend. It seemed very light as he carried it down the corridor, back towards the large room with the computer system in it.

'Okay, all you annoying plumber dudes form a queue,' he said. 'Everyone put a paw on the person in front of them, and when I give the signal the lead dude has to press the 'Enter' button on the computer keyboard.' There was a lot of chattering as the animals lined up, and Sonic made sure that all the unconscious animals were in safe hands. He passed Tails to Joe Sushi, who seemed eager to take him, and then stood well back.

‘Press the key!’ he said. There was a flash of light which covered the whole long queue of his friends, scanning every part of their bodies. A second later it disappeared and they were whisked into the computer screen. It took much less time than when Tails or Iggy had been scanned in, and Sonic guessed it was because a lot of the animals were already mostly computer programs because of the effects of the virus on them.

‘I hope they’ll be safe,’ he worried. ‘Tails will take charge of them. Or maybe Iggy. She’s a pretty together mouse dude. If my sidekick ever needs a sidekick, I hope she volunteers.’ There was a crackle from behind him, and he whirled around to look at the computer. The screen was filled with Tails’s foxy face, its digitised whiskers twitching around his smile.

‘Sonic? Sonic?’ he asked. ‘I’m back in the computer, and... um... well, I’m not quite sure how I got in here again, but Iggy says that it’s a good thing I did. Everyone looks like they’re back to normal now. Iggy says she’s got a plan, so I guess we’ll go with her for a bit. You stand guard, okay? We’ll need your help in a while. Until then, stay cool.’

The screen blanked out, returning to its normal ‘ENTER DATA NOW’ message. Sonic turned away. He knew that they would be hours inside the computer, and he had far more heroic things to do with his time than sit around and watch it. Under his feet was Robotnik’s latest secret hideout, and he intended to explore down there and, if he could, catch the evil egg-otistical villain in his lair and put an end to his nefarious plan.

6

SYSTEM CRASHES

A few minutes later, armed with a torch and a strong coil of rope, Sonic returned to the room with the computer and the output device in it. He had already searched what remained of the upper decks of the Wing Fortress, but there had been no sign that anything had been active there for months. The walls were rusted, the girders twisted by the force of the crash, and the floors creaked and clanked ominously as he walked over them. If anything was still working or living in the Wing Fortress, it had to be in the lower section of the fuselage, the part that had buried itself deep in the ground when the skyship had plunged out of the air all that time ago. And so down, down there, into the terrible creaking darkness, was where Sonic had to go.

The power cable was still in place, trailing from the WYSIWYG output device, down through the hole in the floor, to the control desk on the level below. Sonic wondered about disconnecting it, but decided not to, in case Iggy and the others managed to cure the virus and wanted to get out of the machine in a hurry and he wasn't there to help them.

I'll explore for half an hour, then I'll come back and watch the screen, he told himself, before sliding down the cable and landing with a crunch on the pieces of the Grounder that Tails had blown up earlier. The hedgehog flicked on his torch and shone it around the room. He had been right: there were three doors leading out of here, in different directions. What there was no sign of, though, was a staircase.

‘How does fatty Robotnik get up to the room above?’ Sonic wondered to no one in particular. ‘There isn't even a trapdoor, so he couldn't even use his Egg-o-matic to fly up there. There must be another way into the computer room. That Robotnik dude, he's so sneaky it makes my spikes twitch.’ He waved the torch around, trying to decide which of the two doors was the right one to take. They looked identical.

‘Try the scientific-type approach,’ he decided. ‘Eenie meenie minie mose, catch Robotnik by his nose hairs. If he hollers out, who cares? —

Okay, I'll try that one,' he said, pointing to the door on the left, and opened it. It was a broom cupboard. 'Hot rats,' Sonic snapped, and turned away.

There was a startling crash of falling broom handles and cascading dustpans. Sonic whirled back as two heavily-built Grounders smashed through the items which had hidden them and ploughed towards him with drills spinning wildly, their tracks skidding across the metal floor.

Sonic thought fast. It would be easy to destroy them with a simple spin attack, but perhaps that was not the best thing to do. The Wing Fortress was huge and he might spend hours wandering around its corridors and rooms before he found anything out. It would be much better to have a guide...

'Yaaaaaaargh!' he yelled, hurtling towards the first Grounder, whirling like a buzz-saw. He hit it in the centre of its domed forehead, and it exploded into pieces of plating with a very satisfactory bang — but Sonic had already bounced upwards off it, and was spinning through the air towards the second one. At the last moment before he hit, he threw out his arms and legs. Instead of smashing into the Grounder, he landed on top of it, sitting astride its metal head. The robot lurched and spun its tracks, but its stumpy arms could not reach him. Sonic pulled out his torch and pressed it against the side of the Grounder's head.

'Right,' he said. 'Stop that. This thing I'm holding to your braincase is a Binary Logistical Unprogrammer For Friendliness. If you do what I say, then I won't have to use it on you. Otherwise... He rattled it menacingly against the robot's head. 'Otherwise I switch it on, and you'll become a good guy. You'll stop being a grumpy old Grounder and you'll have to love all the little birds and animals and play with them all day long.'

'Eurgh,' the robot said, making a sound like someone who has just found half a worm in their apple. 'That's really horrible. That's so horrible I can't bear to think about it a moment longer. What do you want me to do?' Its voice was coarse and rough.

'That's a terrible sore throat you've got there,' the hedgehog said. 'What doe? Robotnik do, polish your vocal boxes with sandpaper? I want you to take me to the big cheese himself.'

'The big cheese?' asked the Grounder.

‘The head honcho. Chief palooka. Number one. Top dog. Numero uno. Boss Charlie. The hammer man. The kingfish. The great pooh-bah. The grand enchilada himself.’

‘Who?’ the Grounder asked.

‘Robotnik, you dweeb!’ Sonic snapped. ‘I’d heard of artificial intelligence, but I’ve never met a robot programmed for artificial stupidity before. Just remember, no funny business.’ He tapped the end of the torch against the robot’s head. ‘Or you get reprogrammed into Mister Fluffy Wuffy Grounder, the nicest tin can on Mobius.’

With a lurch, the Grounder rolled towards the second door, which opened automatically as it approached. Sonic ducked as it went through the doorway. He was pleased that his plan was going so well, and that the robot had fallen completely for his bluff — or rather, his BLUFF. On the other hand, all Robotnik’s creations were dead sneaky, like their maker, and it was possible that he was being led into a trap, or deep trouble. Still, he thought, I can probably get out of it okay. After all, I am Sonic the Hedgehog.



Meanwhile, deep inside the computer system, Tails was sprinting down one of the long silver roadways, closely followed by Iggy and the others. His black control box had got lost somewhere in the confusion of getting out of the computer, saving Sonic from the Grounder and then being turned briefly into a video-game character, so he couldn’t just zoom everyone to the Programming Language section of the computer’s memory, which was where they were headed. Still, the roads were great for running: smooth and straight, and Tails was very tempted to zoom ahead, stretching his legs, and let the others catch up in their own time. But he didn’t; heroes have responsibilities, he reminded himself.

Before too long, he could see that they were coming to one of the open spaces, like the Node he had first visited or the place where the Memory Cache or the output device had been. This one was different. It was not completely bare like the Node had been, nor did it have some huge construction or building in the middle of it. Instead the bare metal was covered, as far as his eyes could see, with what looked like stacks of bricks

and blocks and columns and pipes and cables and wheels and gears and cans and tubes and plates and odd-shaped pieces of steel, copper, silicon, plastic, glass and any number of other weird things.

The group reached the end of the pathway and ran on, into the middle of the stacks of items. Iggy gave a shout and everyone stopped. Tails looked around at the heaps, which seemed to go on forever. Some of them stretched upwards to the sky, which was now yellow. The fox walked over to the nearest pile and picked up something from it. It was a slim, streamlined wheel, built of some light metal. Stamped on it was the word 'Goto'. He wandered back towards Iggy and the others, studying his find.

'What's this?' he asked.

'It's a Goto, dimbo,' Iggy said. 'It lets you go to places in the computer.'

'So I could use it to go to the video card and tell Sonic we're okay?' asked the fox hopefully.

'Nope,' Iggy said. 'Not unless it was built into you. This is the part of the computer where programs are created, and they're made out of all these things around us.' She waved her arm at all the piles of bits and pieces. 'That's why we're here: I'm going to try to come up with something that will cure the computer virus, or which we can plug into the output device which will let us go through but stop the virus going with us.'

'I think I see,' Tails said, scratching his head. He dropped the Goto to the ground, and it landed on its edge, whirled around and sped back to the pile of other Gotos. 'Will it take long?' he asked.

'I don't know, but I'd say — yes,' Iggy said, already studying something that looked like a telescope with a steering wheel attached to it, marked 'Drivparm'.

'So what should we do while you're doing that?' asked Tails.

'I don't know. Hang around here, but don't get into trouble. Try building stuff. It's fun.' Tails looked doubtful. 'No, really it is,' continued the mouse. 'Just try fitting bits together until you get something that works. It's like a giant construction set. You can build some really cool stuff if you work at it.'

‘Like what?’ asked the fox.

‘Like — well, everything you've met in here has been programmed out of these building blocks. The giant Buzz Bombers, the output device, the thing that dropped the blocks on you, the blocks themselves, all of it. You can make whatever you want. Now go and think of something, please, because I've got to work to do.’

‘Okay. ‘ Tails eyes were wide open and there was a crafty smile on his lips as an idea came together in his mind. ‘Hey gang, gather round,’ he called to the others. ‘I've got a little arts and crafts project for us to do.’



Sonic rode his unlikely steed into the darkness of the corridor, heading deeper into the underground depths of the Wing Fortress. The Grounder's eyes glowed with a faint light, just enough to show Sonic the stretch of passage two or three metres ahead of him. From time to time the hedgehog used his torch to scan ahead of them, checking for possible ambushes or traps. He knew that one of Robotnik's robots would happily destroy itself if it meant the destruction of Robotnik's number-one enemy as well.

‘Hold on — not in there,’ he snapped as the Grounder turned towards a doorway marked *Reactor Chamber: Do Not Enter Without Protective Clothing*. ‘What do you think I am, stupid?’

‘It was worth a try, ‘ grumbled the grumpy robot, trundling on down the corridor. At the end was a pair of doors which slid open as they approached, and the robot and its rider moved through them, into a small cubicle lined with bare metal on the walls, ceiling and floor. The doors slid shut and the cubicle started to descend.

‘Where are we heading?’ Sonic asked.

‘Down,’ the Grounder replied in a voice that implied Sonic was possibly the daftest person it had ever met if he hadn't figured that out for himself.

‘And what's down?’

‘Robotnik is,’ the Grounder answered in an even more sarcastic voice.

‘That was who you wanted to see, wasn't it?’

‘Does Robotnik know I'm coming?’ said the hedgehog.

‘I haven't told him.’

‘That's good. I like surprises,’ Sonic said, looking around the inside of the lift they were in. ‘Hey, I don't think much of the decoration in here. Who designed this thing? I mean, it's almost totally blank and boring, except for that video camera up — uh oh.’ A video camera meant only one thing: Robotnik did know he was coming after all. He was about to ask the Grounder why it had lied to him when two things happened: Sonic realised that the robot hadn't lied, it just hadn't told him all the truth; and the lift slowed and came to a halt. The doors opened on to a dark, featureless corridor beyond.

‘Are we there?’ he asked.

‘It depends where you mean by "there",’ the Grounder said. ‘Wherever you go, there you are.’

Sonic realised that he was going to have to be a lot more careful with the way he phrased his questions to this robot badnik: it must have been programmed with a particularly devious language-analysing system. Or maybe it was just being annoying. ‘Okay,’ he said. ‘Let's play twenty questions. What level is this?’

‘Level eighteen,’ the robot answered, flashing its eyes at him.

‘Is Robotnik on this level?’

‘No.’

‘Which level is Robotnik on?’

‘Seventy-three.’

‘Seventy-three?’ Sonic exploded. ‘But we're not even close! Bogus! Does this lift go down to level seventy-three?’

‘Yes.’

‘How do I make it go down that far?’

‘You can't. Only badniks with the correct access code can.’

Sonic sighed. ‘And I suppose you haven't got the access code,’ he

said.

‘No.’

‘Where can I find a badnik with the right access code?’

‘Level eighteen.’

‘Now we're getting somewhere!’ Sonic stopped trying to see what was down the unlit corridor and turned to face the Grounder head-on. ‘So what happens on this level eighteen, then?’

‘It's the badnik construction-factory level,’ said the Grounder.

‘Oh yeah?’ Sonic said. ‘And —’

‘CHAAAAAARGE!’ yelled something from behind him. The hedgehog whirled round. Light flooded the corridor, revealing what had been hiding from him in there. He didn't like what he saw. Rank upon rank of Robotnik's robots were advancing towards him. In the front line was a battalion of Crabmeats, the armour-plated red crabs, and they were flanked on either side by two squads of Caterkillers, the slow-moving but deadly insectoids from the Marble Zone, with their fangs and horned sections gleaming in the bright light. Behind them was a line of Slicers, the fearsome grasshopper lookalikes, each armed with a pair of shining front claws which, Sonic knew, could be used just like boomerangs — sharp, deadly boomerangs. At the back sat four solid Crawls, the most armour-plated badniks in the whole of Robotnik's army, each one carrying a shield and waving its steel pincer at the hedgehog in the lift.

In the air above the army hovered Buzzers and Whisps, and clinging to the walls of the corridor were the menacing shapes of Coconuts, the bomb-throwing monkeys, and Newtrons, the robotic lizards who lay concealed until the very best moment to appear and fire their ball bombs. Ahead of the pack rolled several blue balls, which Sonic recognised with a shudder: Rollers, the only badniks on the whole of Mobius who could move almost as fast as himself. One Roller on its own was, like, bad news; several of them were a potential disaster and when they were backed up by all the massed firepower behind them, this was a catastrophe waiting to happen.

‘All this, just for me?’ Sonic said mockingly, trying to put a brave face on a bad situation. ‘Shucks. I'm flattered You needn't have bothered.’

‘If we had known you were coming,’ one of the slicers grated in a monotone voice, ‘we'd have maked a quake.’

‘That's made a quake, you dyslexic droid,’ Sonic jeered. ‘Well, what are you waiting for? Come and get me!’

As the first wave of robots surged towards him, he leaped agilely over the captured Grounder and gave the large badnik a solid shove in the middle of its chrome-plated back. The robot hurtled forward into the advancing ranks of murderous metal monsters, its treads reversing frantically but skidding on the shiny floor. Before it had come to a standstill Sonic had jumped high into the air, whirling his blue body like a flywheel, and landed with a solid crash on top of the Grounder's domed head. The Grounder exploded in a cloud of smoke and small shards of metal, but Sonic was already bouncing back towards the ceiling, and the squadron of Buzzers and Whisps which hung there. A whirling cloud of glittering blades, hurled by the Slicers underneath him, cut through the air where he had been just a moment before.

Buzz bombs and ball bombs were flying through the corridor in all directions now as the army of badnik robots tried to get a good shot at the hurtling hedgehog, but they were doing more damage to their own forces than to Sonic, who flew through the air, bashing Whisps out of his path. He bounced off the ceiling, shot down towards the army below him, and at the last moment unfurled from his spin — to land on the back of a Buzzer, right between its twin engines. It began to shake, trying to throw him off, but Sonic had already jumped on to the Buzzer behind it, and from that one to the next. A buzz bomb exploded in the air next to him and he almost lost his footing, but recovered in an instant and was off again, using the Buzzers as aerial stepping stones above the teeming, blasting, exploding army below.

One more jump, and he would be safely over the ambush and could sprint for the nearest doorway, and maybe an escape route. He leaped for the final Buzzer — and it exploded under his feet as a good shot from a Newtron hit it amidships.

‘Yaaargh!’ commented Sonic as he tumbled downwards, throwing himself into a spin as he fell. His fall was broken by one of the Slicers, who was broken by the fall. Sonic bounced off, straight towards one of the

Crawls. The crab-like creature instinctively raised its shield over its head to fend off the attack and Sonic landed on it, took his bearings for a moment, and leaped off again.

He'd done it! He was past the android army and into the corridor beyond. With a spurt of super-speed he shot off, heading towards the door at the end. With an enraged roar, the remaining badniks turned around and charged after him. At the front of the pack were the Rollers, hurtling through the scrap metal remains of their fallen comrades and heading towards Sonic at incredible speed.

The hedgehog rammed the door with his shoulder. It didn't open, but he was moving so fast that he punched a hedgehog-shaped hole straight through it. Splinters of broken metal and plastic showered around him as he found himself on the landing of a flight of stairs, leading up and down. The Rollers will think I'm going down, he realised fast, and dived the other way, heading for the upwards flight.

With a crash the Rollers hit the door and the rest of it exploded inwards. As one they headed for the stairs leading down and as Sonic headed further upwards he could hear metallic thuds as they bounced from stair to stair. The sounds got louder as the robots accelerated downwards and, one by one, lost control of their descent.

They'll smash open like conkers, he thought gleefully, but any other thoughts were interrupted by another crash as the rest of the robots smashed through the wall around the doorway and onto the landing.

'Buzzers and Whisps, upstairs. Everyone else, follow me down,' commanded one of the Slicers. Sonic began to sprint upwards but he knew that he would tire long before the robotic insects did. As the buzzing of metal wings grew louder behind him, he glanced around at the stairs. They were not straight up and down, but formed a square around a central open shaft, a deep stairwell that headed upwards and downwards. Down the centre of the stairwell there was a long, straight, shining silver pipe.

'Banzai!' yelled the hedgehog and leaped into the open space. His paws grabbed the pipe, his legs wrapped themselves around it and he began to slide down it, accelerating so fast that he could feel his gloves growing hot from the friction. A moment later he zipped past the pack of robots. Some of them fired ball bombs at him, but they sailed past. More

intelligently, two or three of the Coconuts robots leaped off the stairs and grabbed the pipe as well, their monkey tails gripping it firmly and leaving their hands free to hurl more ball bombs at the descending hedgehog. Sonic gritted his teeth and loosened his grip on the pipe. He sped up, but the heat in his paws was almost unbearable. He tried to count off the levels as they zipped past him. What had that Grounder said? Seventy-three?

‘Seventy, seventy-one...’ he counted. A ball bomb whistled past his head, and as it did he twisted his body and flung himself across the open space, to grab on to the banisters. His hands really hurt from the heat, but he hung on. Behind him, the surprised Coconuts hurtled past, headed straight for the bottom of the stairwell.

Sonic hauled himself over the banister and ran for the nearest doorway. He was way ahead of the pursuing robots, but there was no point in wasting his advantage. He flung open the doorway, jumped through and slammed it behind him, then turned to see...

‘Robotnik! Don't move, you evil bully,’ Sonic shouted as he recognised the broad back of his arch enemy. ‘I've caught you in your secret lair!’

The large scientist turned slowly. He was sitting at a desk, in front of another one of his computer terminals, and as he moved Sonic could see that behind the computer was a device that looked a lot like a WYSIWYG Output Device that he and Iggy had assembled. The massive mad scientist's face was beaming with smiles.

‘You've caught me, my spiky saboteur?’ he said. ‘I think not. I think I've caught you. Hook line and sinker.’

‘What do you mean — yaargh!’ the hedgehog exclaimed as some unseen force lifted him off the ground. He struggled in mid-air, but something was holding him there. By twisting his neck, he could just see four cables hanging from the ceiling with hooks at their ends. These hooks were fastened through the holes the Grounder had drilled in his spikes! He was trapped. Bummer.

Underneath him, the fat form of Robotnik pranced around on the floor in delight. ‘Sonic!’ he said. ‘How nice of you to drop in. I won't keep you hanging around long. You're just in time.’

‘In time for what?’ asked the hedgehog.

‘Oh, for me to explain the plot, and for you to die— ha ha ha! You see, you were wrong when you thought this was my secret lair. Actually it's just another of my workshops. And — ha ha ha! — just as you came in, I set a little clock running. You can't stop it, and in three minutes it will blow this whole place sky high! Ha ha ha!’

‘You are mad,’ exclaimed Sonic. ‘We're way underground — you'll never get out in time. Never!’

‘Ah, but I will!’ the potty professor countered. ‘You see, the computer terminals I have activated all over the planet Mobius were only partly to trap you and your little friends. With the addition of these wonderful WYSIWYG output devices — ha ha ha — they make a very useful network of teleporters. Enter the computer in one zone, and get outputted in a different one! Brilliant! I'm such a genius! Ha ha ha!’

‘But what about the computer virus?’ the hedgehog objected. Although he knew time was running out, he was intrigued by the scientist's description.

‘I wrote that virus, you moronic mammal!’ Robotnik screeched, his bulbous stomach bouncing up and down as he pranced around the room. ‘It was to stop you from using the computers that way! You can't escape from the computer system safely unless you use the anti-virus program on yourself first, and to do that, you need to know where the antidote is stored. And you'll never find it! Never, ever ever! Ever.

‘And now, at last, I can start to populate the whole of Mobius with my marvellous creations without worrying about you and your annoying friends! Ha ha ha ha ha!’ Robotnik glanced at his watch, grabbed a microphone off the table and started to sing into it. His loud, out-of-tune voice boomed out from hidden speakers all over his underground complex.

‘And now,
The end is near...’

Sonic recognised the song. It was something his pal Frankie the Rat from the Casino Night Zone used to sing, but the words had been changed.

‘And so your fate,’ Robotnik continued, louder but still out of tune.

‘Is now quite certain.
You pest,
I’ll say it clear
You’ve had your lot,
For you it’s curtains!
I’m fat, my stomach’s full!
I’ve won this time,
I’m saying bye-bye.
But now, now that I’m off,
It’s time for Chin Lie!’

A thoroughly gobsmacked Sonic gawped as the insane doctor did a quick two-step over to the computer on his desk and hit a key. Instantly a familiar beam of white light stabbed out from its screen, enveloping the scientist and drawing him into the screen. It looked like a huge balloon deflating and being pulled through a tiny hole in the glass, and it was not attractive to watch. In less time than it takes Sonic to eat a pizza, Robotnik escaped into his computer.

The hedgehog glanced around. Three minutes, the doctor had said. After his appalling song, he must have around a minute and a half left before the whole place exploded. No problem! Although he couldn’t reach the hooks holding him up, he knew how he could break the cables.

One simple super-sonic spin later, they had snapped and Sonic was safely on the floor again.

He dashed back to the laboratory door and yanked its handle. It was locked solid, but there was another door on the other side of the room. Sonic was about to rush over to it when the large WYSIWYG output device behind the desk hummed briefly and there was a thud. He bent over the desk, trying to look — and a white boot on the end of a shapely leg lashed out at his head. He pulled back quickly as a young woman in a blue dress and brown leggings, wearing spiked bracelets and her dark hair decorated with a white head-dress, leaped up. She landed on the desk in a combat crouch, ready to attack.

‘You shall not pass!’ she announced in an oriental accent.

Sonic goggled at her. Something about her looked slightly familiar, and that worried him, but she was a babe and a half, and like any

gentlemanly hedgehog he wasn't in the habit of hitting babes, unless they hit him first. Had she come out of the output device, or been hiding behind the desk? He didn't think there was time to find out.

‘Look,’ he began, ‘we've got about a minute to get out of here before this place goes up like — erk.’ He dodged as the woman lashed out with her boot again, and sprang off the desk towards him, her arms raised to grab and throw him across the room. Before she got close, Sonic had leaped into the air, straight into a spin attack, heading for her head. One good whack and she'd be out for the count.

With a show of amazing dexterity, the woman ducked out of the flying hedgehog's path, twisted around behind him and grabbed him out of the air, forcing him down towards the floor with her weight on top of him. Sonic stared for a moment at the arms which held him. There was something strange about them — something slightly jagged and unnatural, as if this Chin Lie was not a real person but a computer graphic.

‘You're no babe!’ shouted the hedgehog. ‘You're a part of that program — *Road Warrior Two!* Bogus!’

They landed on the ground with a thud that knocked the breath out of the hedgehog's lungs. His opponent did not answer his shout but curled her lip at him. ‘If you're a computer program, you don't have to get out of here before the place explodes,’ the hedgehog continued working out. ‘You're just here to stop me getting out in time! Double bonus bogus!’ He rolled away from her, across the floor to the other side of the room.

‘I'm here to beat you to a pulp! I will win the tournament!’ the woman yelled. She launched herself into the air, aiming a kick for Sonic's head.

The hedgehog dodged out of the way, thinking fast. Whether he beat her or not, there probably wasn't enough time now to get out of the Wing Fortress before it blew up, no matter how fast he ran. Dying here, either beaten by some cute computer graphic or blown up by Robotnik, well, it just wasn't a heroic way to go. There had to be another way out. He dodged a flurry of punches and glanced around frantically. The room was filled with scientific equipment but he didn't know what any of it was, and besides the only bit that was switched on was the computer on the desk. Yowsah — the computer!

‘Gotta run, Chin Lie babe,’ he shouted, leaping on to the desk and stomping at the keyboard with one of his feet. This was no time for delicacy — in a few seconds this whole place would explode anyway. As the white light glowed around him, he turned back to look at what his computer-generated opponent was doing.

Chin Lie leaped off the floor and spun around, upside down, her feet whirling around above her head like a helicopter rotor or the blades of a rabid sentient lawnmower as she flew across the room towards him and the monitor behind him. She looked like a flying cyclone, hurtling towards him, her feet ready to kick him to a blue pulp.

Then everything went black.

Oops.

7

TERMINATE AND STAY RESIDENT

Deep in the depths of the computer's memory, Iggy the mouse was sitting on a sturdy block of metal marked 'PRINT', and staring at an assortment of strange components which were scattered around her feet. Some of them had been fitted together to make some kind of strange machine, which she held in her lap and fiddled with, trying to attach another piece. It wouldn't fit, and as she tried to force the two things together, the larger one splintered and fell apart in her hands. She sighed in frustration and began to pick up the pieces.

'Ullo John, got a new motor?' asked a familiar voice from behind her, and she jumped in fright. It was only Tails, clutching something in his paws. 'How's it going?' he added.

'Badly,' Iggy said. 'No, I don't have a new motor. I don't even have the beginnings of an anti-virus program here. Doing it this way is so different to the way I normally program computers, from the other side of the screen. Putting words together in order to make a series of instructions is one thing, but actually having to put the bits together, so that they all work together at the right time to do the right thing — well, it's much harder than I thought it would be. I'm trying to fit them together the same way I would for a normal computer program, but it just isn't working.' She stared sadly at the heap of pieces on the floor in front of her, then looked up at the fox. 'So what have you and the others been doing?'

'Having fun,' Tails said, pointing over his shoulder.

Iggy looked in the direction he indicated, gasped and started to back away. 'T-T-Tails —' she stuttered. 'M-m-move away. There's a huge war machine behind you.'

'Yeah, I know,' the fox grinned cheerfully. 'Good, innit?'

'W-w-what do y-you mean "good"?' Iggy stammered, still retreating, her eyes fixed to the colossal silvery shape.

‘Well, you told us to try building stuff, so we did.’ Tails said. ‘It was great, just like mucking around with a giant construction set. Everyone got really into it. We call it the Robotnik Anti-Virus And Geek Exterminator, or the RAVAGE tank for short. It's dead good.’

‘Does it work?’ Iggy asked, still not quite believing her eyes. The thing was about twenty times as tall as Tails, and at least a hundred times as long. Its sleek, shining body hovered a few centimetres above the ground, defying gravity with ease. Its outline was speckled with the shapes of gun barrels, laser cannons, rocket launchers, and the top was dominated by a huge turret fitted with two enormous howitzer barrels. Small figures swarmed over the massive tank, fixing a few last subroutines to its structure. As Iggy watched, the turret swivelled a few degrees, and a small flock of bluebirds flew out of the end of one of its massive barrels, followed by Flicky.

‘If you built this all yourself, then I'm impressed. No — I'm astonished,’ the white mouse admitted, still not quite believing what was before her eyes.

‘Well, not quite all of it,’ Tails admitted. ‘We found something over behind one of the piles of parts — it was called a Data Bus — and we made a few modifications to it. Well, a lot of modifications, actually. It runs okay here, but do you think it'll work on the shining paths at all?’

‘If it's a data bus, then it will,’ Iggy said. ‘That's what data buses do. Nice work, Tails. We may be stuck in here, but at least nothing's going to mess with us now.’ She paused for a moment, then blushed a deep red, even her white ears going pink. ‘Did I ever tell you that I'm a member of your fan club?’ she said. ‘If we get out of here okay, I'd really like your autograph — if that's okay with you. You're kind of a hero to me, you know, and I've always dreamed of meeting you...’

The fox was not quite sure what to say. He knew he had a fan club, but he had never actually met any of its members before; at least, not anyone who owned up to it, and he felt really awkward now. He shuffled his feet shyly, trying to think of something cool to say. Luckily the silence was broken by a shout from the top of the RAVAGE tank's turret. It was Porker Lewis.

‘Hey, Tails!’ he yelled. ‘The radar's picked up something approaching at high speed. Come and have a look.’

‘It's got radar?’ Iggy asked as Tails lifted her up onto a ladder set into the side of the hovering tank.

‘Yup,’ he answered, starting to climb. ‘Radar, and all sorts of weapons. We've got DEBUG lasers, DELETE cannons, some PAUSE stun-grenades, a bunch of WINDOWS sleep-gas grenades, a couple of OS/2 system-crashers, some BAT files for hand-to-hand stuff — even a REFORMAT bomb.’

Iggy shuddered. ‘I hope we don't have to use that,’ she said uneasily. ‘It would probably take us out as well.’ Together they reached the top of the ladder, ran across the top of the tank to the turret and climbed down into the inside.

It was a bit of a mess; well, a lot of a mess. Various people were still fitting bits together, and there were a lot of bare wires hanging out and pipes that did not lead anywhere at all. Even if the tank looked sleek and efficient from the outside, it was obvious that it probably wasn't as good as it looked. Still, for something knocked together from a lot of odd components by a bunch of amateurs who had never programmed a computer in their lives, it was a pretty good job.

‘Over here,’ Porker called. The three of them stared at a glowing screen in one of the walls. On it, a blip moved down one of the long silver pathways, heading towards the Programming Language section and then at an incredible speed.

‘You think it's trouble?’ Porker said, worried.

‘It might be,’ Tails pondered. ‘I've only seen two things that ever moved that fast. One of them was that black ball which chased me earlier. The other's Sonic. If he's in the computer it definitely means we're in trouble, but not the way you meant.’ He leaped out to the hatch and stared over the metal expanse of the plain beyond the tank, shading his eyes from the glow of the yellow sky.

‘It is Sonic,’ he said at last. ‘Oh brother, Robotnik's got us by the short and spikies now.’



‘So Robotnik's somewhere in the computer as well?’ Sally Acorn asked.

It was several minutes later. Sonic and several of his friends were sitting on top of the tank, sharing information and discussing plans. The hedgehog was still nursing the bruise on the top of his head where he had spin-attacked the tank, thinking it was one of the computer's defence systems.

‘Yeah,’ Sonic said. ‘And he said he's got a cure for the virus program hidden somewhere in this system, but he said we'd never, ever find it. Said something about using the computers and output devices as a teleporter network across the planet, and then he dived into the screen, and this babe from *Road Warrior Two* appeared and tried to discombobulate me before the whole place blew up. I got into the computer just in time, reckoned you might be here trying to cure the virus, and — well, here I am. And nobody's said they're glad to see me yet.’

‘We're not,’ Iggy said crossly. ‘You were supposed to stay by the computer and wait for us to come out.’

‘Hey, look on the bright side,’ Sonic said.

‘There's a bright side?’ interrupted Tails.

‘Well, it's brighter than the other side was, anyway,’ said the hedgehog, miffed. ‘You were getting nowhere finding a cure for the virus; but now you know there's one in here already. Plus, I totalled one of Robotnik's secret hideouts.’

‘Do you know that for sure?’ Sally said, flicking her squirrel tail. ‘I mean, you were inside the computer. How can you be certain that the place blew up?’

‘Because the part of the computer I was in blew up too! There was this humungous explosion and a ball of fire and I ran like crazy. When I looked back the whole thing had disappeared. Totally gone.’

‘It must have been a terminal on the network, not one of the important computers,’ Iggy said. ‘Otherwise we'd have all felt it.’

‘So what's the plan?’ Tails asked. ‘We may all be computer programs now, but I still feel really hungry. I could eat a subdirectory.’

‘No time for that,’ Sonic said surprisingly. ‘We gotta find the cure for the virus and get out, back to the planet. Robotnik's up to something. I can feel it in my spikes. Iggy, dude, you know about computers and how they work inside. You got any clue where this anti-virus might be?’

‘Not really,’ the white mouse said, her thin whiskers twitching. ‘Fatty's bound to have protected it, but that might mean it's surrounded by really vile evil live security programs, or that it's hidden somewhere that we wouldn't think of looking for it.’

‘Where's a good place to start?’ Sonic asked.

‘The central processor — the CPU, the biggest, baddest chip on the motherboard: That's what controls everything. Nothing happens in this system without the CPU knowing about it.’

‘All right!’ the hedgehog exclaimed. ‘Enough talking, let's get moving. We've got a date with this CPU dude, and if it doesn't tell us what we want to know, me and the RAVAGE tank are gonna kick its silicon butt from here to the input/output port! Everyone on the tank.’

The rest of the animals rushed to clamber on to the main body of the huge tank. Tails climbed into the turret, flicking his twin tails with irritation. Sonic had taken command of the situation and the tank as if he had been there the whole time and Tails was annoyed with him. Still, supposed the fox, that was what heroes were for. One day, maybe, he'd be able to do the same thing.

‘Advance!’ Sonic's voice yelled from above. ‘Full ahead both engines! Warp factor six. Pedal to the metal. Full throttle. Let ‘er rip. Splice the mainbrace. Kick in the afterburners. Push the hammer down. Jump to lightspeed. Er, which way are we going?’

‘Steer for the path on the right,’ Iggy's voice came from above.

‘Right!’ Sonic shouted. ‘Starboard! Dexter! Off-side! Recto! Thataway!’

The crew inside the turret sprang into action, throwing switches, twisting knobs, pulling levers and watching dials. Tails stood at the helm,

clutching the steering wheel in both hands, and turning it carefully as the RAVAGE tank rose a few centimetres above the ground and began to move forward. For such a huge machine it was very sensitive to the controls, and Tails found himself having to jerk the wheel from left to right and back again to avoid ploughing into the huge piles of computer program parts as he steered between them. It was quite fun, like playing a huge video game, until he took one corner a little too fast and the massive tank skidded sideways into an enormous heap of empty BAT files, which crashed down onto the turret, bouncing off its armour and rolling to the ground.

‘Careful!’ Sonic warned from above. ‘You’re not on the dodgems now.’

Tails slowed the tank’s speed down until there were no more obstacles in the way and it was headed straight for the path. ‘Full speed!’ he told Johnny Lightfoot, and the rabbit yanked the acceleration control right across. The tank leaped forward and Tails was pulled backwards by the sudden increase in speed. He held fast to the steering wheel, desperately twisting it from side to side as the tank hurtled down the wide silver path and around the sharp corners in its way.

He could hear Sonic’s voice from above, going: ‘Whooooooooooooah!’ and the faint squeak of a mouse in distress. The silver pathway was narrowing and every so often the tank bounced off one of the invisible walls on either side. It was an uncomfortable ride, but Sonic had said that speed was important, and Tails was actually quite enjoying himself.

‘Something on the radar. Two things. Coming this way, fast,’ Porker Lewis blurted from his position at the back of the turret. Tails peered out through his windscreen. He could just make out two dots in the far, far distance. They got bigger as he watched.

‘Sonic! Trouble ahead!’ he shouted up to his friend.

‘Yee-haw! Battle stations!’ Sonic yelled, diving down through the hatchway into the turret. Iggy followed him a moment later, and rather more carefully, but Sonic was already peering over Porker’s shoulder at the radar screen.

‘Whatcha reckon, my piggy pal?’ he asked.

‘They’re big, they’re flying and they’re headed this way.’

‘Estimated time of arrival?’

‘Now!’ Tails screeched as two huge Buzz Bombers swooped down from the yellow sky towards the RAVAGE tank, dropping their glowing buzz bombs at the last moment. Tails yanked the controls and the tank lurched sideways. One bomb went wild, blowing a crater in the metal roadway, but the other hit the side of the tank. The turret was rocked by the explosion, and Tails was thrown to the floor.

‘Don't just lie there!’ Sonic shouted, leaping for the steering wheel. He guided the massive tank around the crater in front of it, then jumped sideways to the controls of the tank's huge twin cannons, grabbing the joystick which controlled their aim. The tank's turret spun round as he twisted it and Tails was thrown to the floor again.

‘Yikes! Careful!’ he complained, but Sonic's mind was set on its task. He squinted down the cannon's binocular sights as the two Buzz Bombers regrouped high above them and began to hurtle down for another attack. He waited until they were so close that he could see the lights of their eyes, then squeezed the cannon's triggers.

There were two colossal reports, so close that they sounded like one, and an instant later two slightly quieter explosions from outside, followed by a very soft tinkling sound as small pieces of deleted Buzz Bomber bounced off the tank's hull. Everyone on board gave a muffled cheer. Sonic looked around.

‘Yaroo! We're in the clear,’ he rejoiced. ‘Throw this thing into overdrive, Tails — we've got a CPU to get to.’

‘Not so fast,’ Porker said from his position by the radar screen. ‘I'm picking up more incoming blips. Three, four, fi— loads!’

‘Man all the guns!’ Sonic shouted excitedly. Sally Acorn and Iggy coughed in unison. Sonic cast a glance back at them.

‘Sorry, babes. Okay, person all guns!’ he said.

‘We're not persons, we're anthropomorphised animals,’ Johnny Lightfoot corrected.

‘Look, just get to the rotten guns, all right?’ the irate hedgehog snarled. Crew members scuttled around the turret and clambered over the

outside of the tank, moving to their weapons' controls. Sonic peered through the gunsights at the approaching enemy squadrons. Were they Buzz Bombers, or the more modern Buzzers? They were too far off to tell, but whichever they were, there was an awesomely humungous lot of them.

'Open fire!' he yelled, and the whole tank shook as every gun on it hurled a fusillade of rockets, bombs, missiles, beams, torpedoes, bullets and rays into the air. The first wave of oncoming attackers disintegrated into pieces, but the rest swept onwards towards them, answering the tank's challenge with a volley of buzz bombs. Tails steered the tank between them and the craters they left while Sonic waited for his cannons to recharge. In the air above them, Buzz Bombers and Buzzers whirled, twisted, fired and blew up as the tank's gunners' aim improved, and pieces of the airborne assailants zinged around them.

'Step on it, Tails!' Sonic commanded. 'Try and outrun them — let's see what this baby can do!'

Tails yanked the throttle control full open and the RAVAGE tank roared ahead down the straight lane of the silver route. A few buzz bombs exploded nearby, their tinny roars shaking the tank as it hurtled away. The animals stationed behind the DEBUG lasers mounted at the back of the tank kept up their barrage of fire until the last of Robotnik's attack force had been reduced to digital wreckage. The tank zoomed on.

'That's the last of them,' Sonic said, turning from the gunsight. 'We can breathe easy again — unless Porker decides that something else is after us.'

'I hate to tell you,' Porker said, swallowing nervously, 'but there's something really big coming up from behind Fast. Really fast. And big. Really big and really fast.'

'We get the message,' Sonic said. 'Any ideas, anyone?'

Tails had got one. 'Take over at the wheel, dude,' he said, before sprinting across to the open hatchway and climbing the ladder three rungs at a time. He stuck his head out into the rushing air above and looked back. Something very large was rushing up behind them, and he recognised it—as he'd been afraid he might. It was the flying tubular fortress with the

onions on its towers that had bombed him with its odd-shaped blocks, back when he had first arrived in the computer. He jumped back into the cabin.

‘It’s bad news,’ he panted. ‘Really big, really fast and really bad news.’

‘Can we outrun it?’ Iggy wondered. ‘If we can get to the CPU, we should be safe in there.’

‘No way,’ Sonic said. ‘Look!’

They looked. A way ahead of them, the silver path ended suddenly. Its edges were ragged and twisted, as if something huge had blown up the entire roadway for kilometres ahead of them. A vast chasm gaped open where it ended, the far side barely visible in the distance.

Iggy gasped. ‘That explosion in the Wing Fortress — it must have taken out much more of the computer system than we thought. We’ll have to find another way through to the CPU.’

‘First things first— how do we turn the tank around?’ Tails asked with a panicked frown. ‘The silver road isn’t wide enough!’

‘I know how — hang on!’ Sonic said as he threw the RAVAGE tank into a tight turn, heading it straight for the side of the pathway and the vertical drop below. Just as it looked as if they were going to plunge over the edge, he slammed on the front brakes, and the front end of the enormous tank came to a standstill. The back half carried on the way it had been heading, down the path, and dragged the rest of the tank round with it, so that a second later the massive machine was facing the opposite way down the road, at a standstill.

‘Wa-hey!’ Tails cried. ‘A bulldagger’s revert!’

‘It’s called a bootlegger’s reverse, dude,’ Sonic said. He hit the throttle and the tank started to accelerate back down the roadway the way it had come. Ahead of them and above, but getting closer by the second, was the looming form of the CCCP fortress, its weird shape strangely menacing. The huge hatchway on its underside began to slide open. That could only mean one thing: it was about to start bombing.

Tails leaped across the turret to the controls of the RAVAGE tank’s main cannons, and sighted through them at the approaching behemoth. As soon as the crosshairs in the sights were fixed on the body of the flying

fortress, he squeezed the twin triggers as hard as he could — and was thrown backwards by the force of the recoil. He skidded backwards across the turret's floor and smacked his head against Porker Lewis's radar console. The pig helped him to his feet.

‘Nice shot, dude!’ Sonic said. ‘You hit it dead centre. It's coming down.’

‘It's coming down all right!’ Iggy screamed. ‘It's coming down on top of us!’

Tails, still dazed from his fall, glanced up through the open hatchway. All he could see was the bottom of the mighty CCCP flying ship, and it was belching out smoke and getting much closer, much too fast.

‘Stone me!’ he uttered. ‘Abandon ship! Everybody out! This is not a drill!’

There was an unsightly rush for the hatchway, and the sudden crush of bodies beneath him propelled Tails through the opening like a cork from a bottle. He landed on the tank's top layer of armour; it was pitted and damaged, probably from the Buzz Bombers' earlier attack. All over the tank, the crew were scrambling out of hatches, gun ports, cabins or wherever they had been riding, and heading for the side, rushing down the ladders to the ground below and then away — anywhere apart from the place where the spreading shadow of the falling fortress was cast on the metal runway.

Things were getting pretty crowded on top of the tank, and queues were beginning to form for the ladders already. The braver animals were jumping off the side, hoping that one of their heroes — Sonic or Tails — would be there to catch them, but the fox heard several ‘ouchs’ and ‘aarghs’ as some of the leapers made bad landings. Suddenly, above the ruckus, he heard a small voice.

‘Help!’ it went. ‘Someone, please!’

Tails did not wait for an instant. The voice was coming from a hatchway, and he dashed over to it. At the bottom of the ladder inside lay a small grey rabbit. It looked up.

‘Help me, Mister Tails. I've fallen, and I can't get up.’

The fox leaped down the ladder, picked up the little rabbit and slung it over one shoulder in a fireman's lift, then climbed the ladder as swiftly as he could and stood on the deck of the tank. It was almost deserted already, and as the fox glanced up he could see why. The CCCP fortress had given up its unequal fight with gravity and was hurtling down out of the sky towards them. They had only a few seconds before it crashed into the tank and obliterated them completely.

‘Cling tenaciously to my biceps!’ Tails shouted as he sprinted to the edge of the tank and leaped out into thin air beyond. The rabbit on his back gave a frightened squeal but did what it had been told. Tails dived towards the ground, and at the last moment whirled his twin tails into action, spinning them around like rotors to slow their fall. They hit the ground running, but had hardly taken three steps when there was a colossal crash behind them, a noise that went on and on, and the ground shook with a vibration that knocked the heroic fox off his feet.

Tails hit the ground with a hard thud, and the rabbit hit him with a softer thud. Slowly the crash behind them died away, and Tails slowly raised himself off the floor and looked backwards. The CCCP fortress lay, smoking and ruined, on top of the remains of the RAVAGE tank, which had been completely flattened by the impact. The edge of the nearest of its walls had missed Tails and his injured burden by just over a metre.

‘Whew!’ he breathed, starting to get to his feet.

‘Brian?’ said a worried voice in the crowd in front of him, and Tails looked up to see a large female rabbit standing there. He carefully picked up the small rabbit and carried it over to her.

‘He's twisted his ankle, and had a nasty shock too, but he'll be okay,’ he said, handing her the hurt child. She cradled it in her arms.

‘Oh thank you, thank you,’ she said. ‘What you did was so brave, risking your life like that.’

Tails shrugged. ‘All part of a hero's job, ma'am. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to go.’ He gave a clumsy salute and walked away into the crowd, secretly very pleased. Him! A real hero! At last! Wait until he told Sonic. Then the crowd gasped at something and he looked back. The crashed fortress and the squashed tank were flickering and juddering

silently. Large square chunks of them disappeared, and then they both faded to a grey, static kind of colour, fizzed for a second, shrank to a tiny dot of bright colour and vanished completely.

‘I wonder what that was?’ the fox wondered aloud.

‘Probably the programs finally crashing and being deleted,’ said a small familiar voice at his elbow. It was Iggy, and Sonic, Sally Acorn and Porker Lewis were right behind her.

‘Sonic! You should have seen me,’ Tails said excitedly. ‘I was great! I saved a little rabbit and —’

‘No time for that,’ Sonic said. ‘We've got plans to make.’

‘But they called me a hero and everything,’ Tails said, his ears drooping in disappointment that his friend did not want to hear his tale of bravery.

‘Tails, old buddy, old bean, the first thing a hero learns is that there's a time to tell stories, and a time to make plans. Guess which this is? Okay, so what's the plan? Iggy?’

‘We're stuck,’ Iggy said. ‘We can't get through to the CPU this way, because the path has been blown up. We're going to have to find another route, and that could take hours or even days. Plus everything inside the computer, every security program and warning device, is going to be on full alert. Basically, we're in trouble.’

‘You've explored around the computer before, Tails,’ said Sally Acorn. ‘Do you have any ideas?’

‘Yup,’ the fox said. He turned and sprinted away, towards the place where the RAVAGE tank and its squasher had lain a until a few moments ago. The others watched him go with surprise.

‘I wonder why he did that,’ Porker Lewis wondered.

‘Probably the strain on the little dude's mind,’ Sonic said. ‘It takes true grit and experience to be a real hero, and he hasn't got it yet — hey, he's coming back.’

Tails skidded back into the middle of the circle of friends, with a big grin on his foxy features. In his right paw he clasped a large black box, covered with buttons and with a small screen at the top of it. It looked like

a big calculator, or maybe the remote control of a very complex video recorder. Above its little screen was printed a large '23'.

'It's the flying fortress's control handset,' he said, panting slightly. 'As soon as the fortress disappeared, it would have dropped to the ground, and I managed to find it. This thing will take us anywhere we want to go — and it's probably got a higher security rating than anything else in here except old Egg-bucket himself.'

'Nice one, Tails!' Iggy exclaimed. She tried to slap him on the back, but wasn't tall enough and only managed to reach the top of his legs instead. 'Okay. Can you ask it what the quickest way to the CPU is from here?'

Tails busily pressed the device's buttons, and waited for a moment as the reply flashed across the screen. 'It says we can get there if we take a short-cut through the Games Directory,' he said.

'Okay,' Sonic said. 'Then set a course for the Games Directory right now. Come on: we've got an anti-virus to find!'

8

VIRTUALLY REALITY

‘That must be it!’ Iggy said, pointing towards a grey line on the horizon. She, Tails, Sonic and over one hundred companions were hurtling down one of the silver pathways, suspended above the ground by an invisible force, while a purple sky glowered down above them, making the whole area seem dark and sinister. They had been travelling like this for a few minutes, zipping from path to path across nodes and junctions. They had seen a few black dots in the distance that might have been attack waves of Robotnik's computer security systems, but the mysterious force had carried them away at high speed before the pursuers could catch up.

Tails pointed the black handset at the horizon, pressed a button and stared at the small screen. ‘That's the Games Directory all right, dead ahead,’ he said. ‘It looks weird, doesn't it?’

‘Like some kind of maze or labyrinth or something, ‘ Sally Acorn commented.

‘No problem!’ Sonic breezed. ‘Tails and me, we know about labyrinths. You're safe with us. Don't worry about a thing.’ He looked ahead as the thing they were sitting on raced towards a large low grey wall, with a single opening in it. They were headed for the opening.

‘Brace yourselves,’ Tails warned. ‘When these things stop, they stop real —’

It stopped, slamming to a halt just in front of the dark opening in the wall. The animals didn't; they were thrown out of their invisible seats and through the opening into the black shadows beyond.

‘— sudden,’ Tails finished. He sat up and rubbed his head. ‘Oof. Where are we?’

‘Speaking personally, you're sitting on me,’ came a mousy voice.

‘Sorry.’ Tails moved.

A rather squashed Iggy rolled out from under him and shook herself. 'Hey,' she said. 'Where's the opening in the wall gone?'

'Gone,' Sonic said. It had too. It was as if the walls had moved together and sealed it off. Their only way out had disappeared into nothingness.

'By the great horn spoon!' Tails exclaimed obscurely. He rushed up to the wall and rapped it experimentally with his knuckles. It sounded very solid indeed. He turned back and peered around him.

It was dark. The walls towered high above them, casting long shadows over the passage. A little light filtered down from the glowering purple sky, but not enough for them to work out exactly where they were, or which way to go. Ahead, down the corridor, Tails could see a large door set into one of the walls. There was something written on it. He set off towards it.

'Hey, Tails, come back!' It was Sally Acorn. 'We need to decide what to do before you go wandering off doing hero stuff on your own.'

'Oh, okay,' Tails said. He could see that the sign on the door read '*Space Intruders*' in big, sinister letters. Wasn't that an old video game? he thought, as he trotted back to the others. I remember it from when I was just a little cub. primitive, but kinda fun as well. What's it doing here? And why's it got a room of its own?

'Okay,' Iggy said, breaking his train of thought. 'Tails, can you use that gizmo of yours to tell us how to get out of here?'

Tails pulled out the black handset and tried punching a few buttons. Nothing seemed to work. The 'Identify' and 'Locate' buttons only told him that he was in the Games Directory, and when he tried telling it to locate the exit, it printed up what looked like a diagram of a printed circuit board, with a large arrow marked '*You are here*' on it. The only problem was that the place the arrow pointed to was marked '*Games Directory*', so that was not a lot of help. The 'Delete', 'Activate' and 'Deactivate' buttons did not seem to do anything at all, and the 'Go To' button produced a message on the screen that told him he had to be at a 'Node Exit' before he could use that.

‘Of course, if life were that easy this book would end a bit early,’ he sighed. ‘Sorry, folks, the black box is a no-show. Anyone else got any ideas?’

‘We're in a maze, right?’ Sonic said. ‘There's gotta be an exit somewhere, and the fastest way to find it has gotta be to split up. I reckon if we divide into two teams, each with one hero and one science dude — like me and Iggy, and Tails and Porker Lewis — then we'll find the way out in double quick time.’

‘If one team finds the exit, how does it tell the other team?’ Sally Acorn asked.

Sonic turned to look at her. ‘That's not important,’ he said. ‘We gotta get someone out of this maze to find the anti-virus program, get out of the computer and stop Robotnik's plan — whatever it is. There's gotta be more to it than just using the computers to teleport around the zones.’

‘Right,’ Tails agreed. ‘No time to waste then. So I'm with Porker, and you're with Iggy. What about the others?’

‘Could be dangerous,’ Sonic said thoughtfully. ‘Sally, will you stay here with anyone who doesn't want to come with us?’ The squirrel nodded. She did not seem too upset at the idea of not having to go and explore the labyrinth. ‘Okay,’ continued Sonic, ‘who else here would rather stay with Sally and not come with us on this great exciting adventure, with lots of scope for heroic stuff and action?’ He looked around. Every hand in the place was raised.

‘Ah. Put your hand down, Tails. You'll never be a hero if you flake out at the first sign of trouble,’ he said. The fox lowered his raised arm, blushing slightly.

‘Okay, so it's just the four of us then,’ Sonic concluded. ‘Nobody else tempted to be immortalised in the history of the planet Mobius?’ Evidently nobody else was. ‘Oh, suit yourselves,’ he said. ‘Catch you guys later.’

The four friends set off down the corridor, past the door marked ‘*Space Intruders*’, to where it split into two passages. It was too dark to tell what was down each one, but they both looked unfriendly. Sonic pointed to the one going left.

‘Me and Iggy, we’ll take this one,’ he decided. ‘You two head off down there. If you hit any trouble, shout. Remember, you’ve got that black box of tricks: it could save your bacon.’

The fox and pig nodded and set off to the right. Within seconds the dark shadows had swallowed them up, and Sonic and Iggy could not even hear the sound of their footsteps any more. The hedgehog and the mouse looked at each other, and then headed down the other passage, their eyes and ears alert for anything that might signal danger.

It came sooner than they thought, but not how they had imagined. A shriek echoed back up the corridor from the other direction. It sounded like a pig in trouble. Iggy and Sonic exchanged a horrified glance, and then set off towards the source of the sound at a dead sprint.

‘It’s the Slight Witch!’ Tails shouted from the darkness ahead of them. His voice sounded faint and unnatural. ‘It’s got —’ and there was silence. Sonic raced into the shadows without thinking: his little buddy was in trouble, and he had to do whatever he could about it.

He skidded to a standstill. The corridor ended in a blank wall. There was a door set into it, with a sign reading ‘*Froggy*’ about halfway up it. Just in front of the door lay a pile of something dark. He bent to pick it up. It was the remains of the black handset that Tails had retrieved from the CCCP flying fortress, smashed into pieces. Its circuits hung out of the casing and, as he watched, it flickered, went grey and vanished into a point of light, just as the fortress and the RAVAGE tank had done.

There were footsteps behind him and Iggy finally caught up, panting heavily. ‘You’re too fast for me,’ she said. ‘Where are the others?’

‘Not here,’ Sonic said grimly. ‘The Slight Witch must have got them. Strange we didn’t see one outside — it must be the sort of program that lurks in the shadows waiting to pounce. There could be another one right here right now.’ He checked around them nervously. ‘Well, let’s just hope they’re okay, wherever they are.’

‘What about trying the door?’ suggested Iggy. ‘They could be through there.’

‘It’s possible,’ Sonic agreed. He reached out and touched the handle — and the two of them were yanked abruptly through as the door flew

open, hurled them into the space beyond, and slammed behind them.

They were somewhere else — somewhere that looked as if it was not just outside the Games Directory, but outside the computer altogether. They were standing on a narrow strip of grass beside a busy highway, with blocky, solid cars and trucks roaring down it in both directions. Beyond that was a riverbank, with a fast-flowing torrent streaming past, carrying heavy logs downstream. Sonic stopped and stared at the scene. Something wasn't quite right with it: everything looked slightly cubic and artificial.

‘Woah!’ he said. ‘*Déjà vu!* For a moment this really reminded me of one of those old classic video games.’

‘Then that's probably where we are,’ Iggy said. ‘This is the Games Directory, remember? We must have found our way into one of the programs in there. So, Sonic, you're supposed to be mister smartypants video game expert, what do we do?’

‘Remember that old joke — why did Chirps the chicken cross the road?’ asked Sonic.

‘Because he was thick?’

‘No, the other reason — to get to the other side. That's where we need to be if we're going to get out of here. Come on!’

‘Shouldn't we use the green cross code?’ Iggy worried.

‘No way! I always use the blue cross code when I cross the road — look left, look right, run like fury!’

Iggy shrugged her shoulders and was about to say something rude, until she remembered that Sonic was an orphan, and thought twice about making any comments about hedgehogs, roads and foolhardiness. The two of them stood on the verge, waiting for a break in the traffic.

‘I've just remembered something about this game,’ Sonic said.

‘What's that?’ Iggy asked nervously, her eyes fixed on the speeding cars hurtling in both directions in front of them.

‘It was played with a time limit. Let's GO!’

The startled mouse found herself yanked off her feet as Sonic grabbed her arm and dived forward into the flow of vehicles. A sleek red roadster bore down on them, showing no signs of braking or turning away, but an

instant before it hit them Sonic had jumped forward into the next lane. A heavy lorry was rushing forward in the opposite direction but again the hedgehog moved on just in time, his mousey companion a single step behind him. With skips, jumps and a lot of muffled gasps and shrieks from Iggy, they finally reached the side of the road, and the riverbank.

‘Whew,’ gasped Sonic. ‘I’m glad to be away from those dimensional transhogrifiers.’

‘Those what?’ asked Iggy.

‘Dimensional transhogrifiers — they turn three-dimensional ‘hogs like me into two-dimensional ‘hogs. Now,’ he said, looking out over the river, ‘it’s time for logs!’

‘They’re not floating downstream randomly,’ Iggy said. ‘There’s a kind of rhythm to the way the logs appear.’

‘Alone or in pairs?’ asked Sonic. ‘I’d noticed that, my scientific friend. This one looks handy. Let’s GO!’

Together they leaped for it, the flickering river rushing beneath their feet. They landed with a jolt that shook the log, spinning it in the water, and it was all they could do to keep their footing as it shook in the turbulent current. Sonic snatched a glance to his right, downstream, and saw a wall of solid blackness that crossed the river. They were moving quite rapidly towards it, and it looked ominous.

‘Quick!’ he urged. ‘Jump onto the next one, or it’ll be Game Over, Players One and Two.’

Iggy didn’t need telling twice: she jumped nimbly across to another log and ran along it, upstream. Sonic followed her, his heavy landing almost tipping the mouse into the bubbling current.

‘Careful!’

Sonic nodded an acknowledgement and leaped for the tail-end of another log floating by. From there it was a quick step on to another, and on to the far bank. He looked around for his companion.

‘Sonic! Help!’ came her plaintive cry, and the hedgehog whirled around to see the mouse stuck on a log in the middle of the river, about to be carried away into the black wall and oblivion. He looked around

frantically, but there was nothing he could throw to save her, nor were there any logs that would get him over to her before she disappeared — the only ones in sight were the one she was on, and a small, fast log floating past the bank where he was standing.

Sonic braced himself and took a powerful kick at the end of the log. It almost flew out of the water, splashing across the surface. One end thumped against Iggy's log and she wobbled precariously, windmilling her arms to keep her balance.

‘Run!’ shouted Sonic. For a few instants the two logs were forming a bridge to the shore, but if Iggy hesitated even an instant the strong current would pull them out of the way — and her off the screen, into the blackness beyond! He held his breath as she swayed, and then found her footing and dashed down the logs towards him. She jumped from the end of the second one onto the bank, and a second later both the floating tree trunks were swept away and disappeared from sight.

‘That was close,’ Iggy gasped, mopping her brow with the end of her tail. ‘I thought I'd had it.’

‘So did I, for a moment,’ Sonic said. ‘Where do we go from here?’ He turned round, to discover that a metal door had appeared behind him in the riverbank. He grinned and pushed it open, and as he did so the riverbank, the river, the multi-lane road and even the walls of blackness faded slowly away, to be replaced by the familiar dingy outlines of the corridors of the labyrinth, lit dimly by the purple sky far overhead.

‘Well, what was the point of all that?’ he asked. ‘We didn't find Tails or Porker in there, and now we're back where we started. Blooming stupid, I call it.’

‘We're not where we started,’ Iggy said. ‘Look. The passages go off at different angles, and there are more doors along here as well. I bet there are different names on them too, and we'd get to different games if we went through them. We're probably in a completely different part of the Games Directory now.’

‘Hey, cool!’ Sonic said. ‘Let's see what we've got on offer along here, then. I could do with a good shoot-'em-up right now.’ He paced down the

corridor, checking the signs on every door. ‘Okay, this one's called *Golden Hatchet*. Sounds good. You want to try it?’

‘No way! Sounds barbaric to me,’ Iggy shuddered. ‘Hey, here's *Super Hang-Up*.’

‘Not fast enough,’ Sonic replied. ‘*Kid Camel*? Now that could be a laugh and a half.’

‘Get real,’ Iggy said scathingly, moving on to the next door along. ‘*Thunderbird 4* — you said you were after a shoot-'em-up.’

‘Yeah — but not a shoot-ME-up!’ Sonic grinned. ‘Hey, this one says it's *Road Warrior Two: Champions Only*. Maybe that babe I fought in Robotnik's laboratory did come out of the output device — she looked like one of the characters from this.’

‘She did?’ And she almost dusted you? And there's eleven more warriors like her in the game? Whoah, no way are we going in there.’

‘Right on, Iggy baby,’ Sonic said. ‘Let's move on quickly and pretend we didn't see that one. How about *Spung*?’

‘No. *Frankie Zapper*?’

‘Nope. *Skippy the Porpoise*?’

‘No. *Flemmings*?’

‘Nope. *Kip Killer*?’

‘No.’

‘Aw, come on,’ Sonic protested. ‘It's supposed to be full of babes in skimpy clothes.’

‘Precisely why not,’ Iggy insisted. ‘*Double Crutch*?’

‘No way! *Zoom Patrol*?’ suggested Sonic.

‘No. *Super Gimbo Land*?’

Sonic turned and looked at the mouse with a pained expression on his face. ‘If I wanted something long and boring,’ he said, ‘I'd watch the Mobius-vision Song Contest.’

‘Okay, it was a silly question,’ Iggy admitted. ‘Hey, hey — come and look at this one!’

Sonic jogged back down the corridor to where she was gazing at the words on a door. '*Planet Mobius*,' he read. 'I don't know it — is that anything like *Sergeant Planet* — oh, hang on. Oh. Oh. Oh right.' Realisation dawned slowly across his face. 'It's gotta be this one,' he said. 'No other possibility. Specially because the corridor hits a dead end in about twenty paces. Shall we go in?'

'After you,' Iggy said politely.

With a nod, Sonic grasped the handle. The door flew open, and suddenly they were somewhere else.



It looked like the Green Hill Zone. It sounded like the Green Hill Zone. The soft texture of grass and earth underfoot felt like the Green Hill Zone. However, it didn't smell like home at all; in fact it didn't smell of anything much. Sonic and Iggy stared around in amazement, slowly taking in the scene. Everything was there: the lakes, the palm trees and bright flowers, the cliffs, and the glistening forms of gold rings hidden all over the zone. But something wasn't quite right. Everything seemed a little bit too two-dimensional.

'Tails! Porker!' Sonic called. There was no reply, only the rushing of the waterfalls, the wind in the trees and the catchy background music. Everything else was very still. 'I don't like it,' Sonic said. 'I thought it would get us home, but this ain't it. It looks like it, but something's missing.'

'The resolution?' Iggy asked, dropping to her knees and plucking a small flower from the ground. She showed it to him. 'Look,' she said. 'It's pretty close to a normal flower, but you can see that it's only a computer drawing of one.' Sonic could. The petals and stem were slightly square, slightly ragged and stepped, and the different colours did not flow smoothly into each other, like a normal flower's should.

'It's close,' he said, 'but not close enough to fool us. So where are we, kid?'

Iggy scratched her nose, thinking. 'Either it's a game version of you and your adventures, which someone somewhere might want to play, I

suppose...’

‘If only she knew, eh, readers?’ Sonic winked conspiratorially. ‘Oh, sorry, Iggy, carry on.’

‘Well, even if someone might want to play a Sonic game, I don't think it would be Robotnik. I think this is a Virtual Reality: a really accurate mock-up of the real world outside, so that he can test out his plans and make sure they work before he lets them loose on the real world — our world.’

‘All righty,’ Sonic said. ‘It's like a computerised testing ground. Hang on.’ He looked around, worried. ‘By the pricking of my spikes, something wicked this way hies.’

There was a low buzzing sound in the distance, off to the right, and suddenly a lone Buzz Bomber whizzed into sight and hovered above them. A buzz bomb formed at the end of its tail, ready to be fired. Sonic reacted immediately: he leaped into the air, spinning like a really spinning thing, heading straight for the computer-generated bug. Even as he was hurtling towards the attacking insect, he heard a distant cry of ‘Eat sonic-spin death, you disgusting robotic weirdo!’ — his own battle cry — and a fast, blue, heroic, totally crucial shape sped across the zone, jumped high into the air and spun towards him. There wasn't enough time to change course or dodge. An instant later the Buzz Bomber found itself squashed completely between two whizzing blue balls of energy, and very sensibly exploded. A dazed rabbit, looking a little like Johnny Lightfoot or one of his relations, dropped out and scampered away. The blue balls fell to the ground, unrolled and stood up.

‘Two Sonics!’ Iggy exclaimed. ‘Wicked!’

Sonic faced his replica. He could see that the other hedgehog was slightly bitty and his spikes weren't quite as smooth as they might be, but otherwise the blue guy was really astonishingly cool and good-looking. He was leaning against a palm tree with an expression of surprise on his face, one foot tapping impatiently. Okay, so the surprise wasn't too cool, but everything else was.

‘What are you doing here?’ the replica Sonic asked. ‘This is a one-player game, dude. Are you some evil robotic duplicate from Robotnik —

because I'll pulverise you if you are. And who's the mouse?'

'No way, man!' exclaimed Sonic. 'The mouse is Iggy. She's a pal from the Mystic Cave Zone.'

'The where?' asked the other hedgehog. 'That's not one of the six zones I know, dude. And who are you?'

'Six zones?' asked Sonic. 'Oh, I get it — Robotnik's only programmed part of Mobius in here. Dude, I know it's hard to believe, but you're inside a computer here. You're not actually *the* Sonic the Hedgehog. That's me. Me and Iggy, we've got stuck in here, and we need your help to get out.'

'Me? A computer program? No way!' exclaimed the other. 'I'm the original smooth operator.'

'Not so smooth,' Sonic said. 'Look at your hands, then look at mine.' He stuck out a paw. The computer Sonic studied the two: his own slightly jagged and unclear fingers next to Sonic's smooth, realistic ones.

'I still don't believe I'm a computer program,' he said grudgingly, 'but there's definitely something weird going on. Why are you here? And why have you got those holes in your spikes?'

'We're looking for two of our friends,' Sonic said. 'Porker Lewis, who you know, and Miles Prower, otherwise known as Tails, who you probably don't. He's a fox with two tails.'

'Never heard of him,' the other hedgehog replied. 'A fox with two tails? That's silly.'

'Almost as silly as a blue hedgehog, dude,' Sonic said. 'Think about it. Now, you want to help us look for them?'

'Action and adventure? I'm your hedgehog! So if I'm a computer program and you're not, how come you two are trapped in here as well?'

As the three characters hurtled through the Virtual Green Hill Zone, with the two blue spiky ones smashing Moto-Bugs, Buzz Bombers, Newtrons and grabbing rings as they went, and Iggy desperately trying to keep up behind them, Sonic explained to his duplicate what was going on in the world outside, what had happened to them in the computer, and how he had got the holes in his spikes.

‘So that's it,’ he finished as they crested the last hill. ‘As soon as we find the anti-virus, we're out of here, we find Robotnik's main base, and we trash it.’

‘Which will destroy the computer with my program on it,’ said the other Sonic. ‘Can't say I'm too happy with that.’

‘No problem,’ said the panting Iggy as she caught up. ‘We'll download you on to a different computer first. Someone ought to keep watch over computer security round here, and I can't think of anyone better! Hey, what's that noise?’

It was a low drone, the sort of sound a small tubby aircar would make. Sure enough, a moment later a small tubby aircar, Robotnik's Egg-o-Matic, appeared over the trees, a large wrecking ball attached to its underside. The two Sonics grinned at each other and leaped into the air to attack.

‘Augh! Two Sonics! Too horrible!’ the virtual Robotnik who was piloting the Egg-o-Matic screeched, a scant moment before the aircar was squashed between two flying spikeballs. It belched smoke, turned around and disappeared the way it had come.

The three victors ran on a few steps, to where the squat metal shape of one of Robotnik's Prison Eggs sat on the grass with a large button on its top. Through the tiny window in its side, Sonic could see friendly faces pressed against the glass. The other Sonic bounced up on to the button, and with a series of small explosions the walls of the Prison Egg disintegrated. Herds of small grey rabbits and blue bluebirds bounced and fluttered away, revealing two rather squashed and flustered figures. Sonic looked at them.

‘I've heard of finding a dead end, but getting stuck in a Prison Egg while trying to get out of a maze has to break all records, dudes,’ he said. ‘Sonic, meet my buddy Tails. You know Porker already.’

‘Two Sonics! Wow! *Déjà vu!*’ Tails said self-referentially, stepping off the remains of the Prison Egg and running a paw through his cowlick of white hair. ‘So are we back in the zone, then?’

‘Nope, still in the Games Directory,’ Sonic said. ‘But I think that finishing this level and letting you two out has given us an exit.’ He pointed behind him, to where a large metal door was standing in the

middle of a grassy field, then turned to speak to the digital Sonic. 'Time we were going, my superlative programmable pal,' he said. 'It's been a gas and a half meeting you. Keep up the good work.'

'Hey, wait up a second,' the other Sonic said. 'Can't I help you guys out? Being stuck inside a microchip isn't a job for a hero.'

Sonic looked at Iggy. Iggy looked at Tails, and Tails looked at Porker, who was looking at something disgusting he'd pulled out of his nose. They all looked away quickly.

'Well, we're just going to the CPU to find the anti-virus, and then we're getting out of here,' Iggy said. 'The best way you can help is by staying inside the computer and stopping that evil Robotnik's plans. We know you can handle it.'

'That sounds cool enough,' the other Sonic agreed. 'I'll do it. Come on, time's a-wasting for you dudes. Let's go go go!' He pulled open the door, and in a jolting flash they were all standing somewhere else, back in the labyrinth of tunnels that made up the maze of the Games Directory — with one important difference: the way out, leading to a long shining path stretching into the distance.

'That's our way out,' Sonic said. 'Well, guess this is cheeribye, Sonic dude. See you on the screen sometime.' He prepared to dash off into the distance, but Porker placed a trotter on his shoulder.

'What about the others?' he said. Sonic was about to reply, but Iggy interrupted.

'If we get out of the computer, we can rescue them easily,' she said. 'Right now we don't know what Robotnik's been up to while we've all been trapped in here.'

'Right,' Sonic confirmed. 'They'll be safe with Sally Acorn in charge. If they're attacked, she could boss the program to death, no problem. Okay, follow me, guys.' Together the two heroes and their two sidekicks zoomed away, out of the exit of the Games Directory and on to the silver pathway beyond, leaving the other Sonic from the computerised Green Hill Zone far behind them.

'Are you sure this is the right way to the CPU?' Porker panted as he tried to keep up with the supersonic Sonic and the tail-powered Tails.

‘Must be. Look what's dead ahead of us,’ Sonic shouted, the slipstream whipping his words back to the mouse and pig who trailed behind the two fast heroes. In the distance he could see that the pathway was already ending in a large open area, filled with an enormous building. It looked like one of the ancient buildings from the Marble Zone, or possibly the Labyrinth Zone, or maybe the Aquatic Ruin Zone. Or maybe all three — it was certainly big enough. Massive columns of white stone supported a huge vaulted roof that seemed to be miles and miles above their heads. Immense carved steps, dotted with hundreds of small figures — probably programs or robots — bustling up and down them, led up to a pair of doors that would have been big enough to park a fleet of hot-air balloons behind. The sky above was orange.

‘Either Robotnik's been putting on even more weight recently,’ Tails commented, ‘or we've arrived, mate.’

‘We've arrived,’ Sonic said. ‘The question is, are we in time?’ He pointed upwards to the bottom of the roof, where a large illuminated sign hung. In letters tens of metres high it read ‘COMPUTER PLANET MOBIUS, CENTRAL PROCESSOR’. In slightly smaller letters underneath were the words ‘*Program Now Running: Mobius Invasion III*’.

The friends stopped and gazed aghast at the sign. Around them the smaller programs — odd-shaped solids, or hazy blurs, or things that looked like animals or robots - hustled and bustled, ignoring them completely.

Were they too late? Had Robotnik already taken over their home? Would they ever get out of the computer now? Turn to the next chapter and you'll find out.

9 OPERATING SYSTEMS

‘What now?’ Porker asked.

‘We go in,’ Sonic said. ‘Hey, Robotnik's invaded Mobius before, and a couple of times he's almost taken the whole place over, but me and my bestest buddy Tails have smashed his badniks and his dreams every time. If we can get out of here, then we can beat the yolk out of him.’

‘Right on!’ Tails exclaimed. ‘You're dern tootin’. Sonic!’

Porker turned to him. ‘Oh, you enjoyed that *Dictionary of Out-of-Date Slang* I lent you, then?’ he asked.

‘You betcha!’ Tails said happily. ‘You ain't just whistlin’ Dixie, my policeman pal — oops, I think I got that one backwards.’

‘We're wasting time,’ Iggy interjected. ‘The anti-virus is in there somewhere, or else there's something in there that'll tell us where it is. Let's go.’ She set off up the long flight of white steps, and the other three followed her quickly.

As they neared the top, they could see that there was a queue to get in through the large doors. Iggy joined the queue, behind something that looked like a Christmas tree with a permed hairdo and wheels. In front of that was a large fish that looked like it was made of blancmange, and in front of that was the multi-sided object that Tails recognised from when he first arrived in the computer. As they waited, other strange shapes joined the queue behind them — a clockwork motorbike, a jet-propelled paintbrush, a two-metre pizza with sliced credit cards and broken china on it. Tails was so hungry that his stomach rumbled out loud for almost a second after he realised what the topping was, and then he suddenly lost his appetite. The queue edged forward slowly, up the stairs and towards the enormous doors.

At the door was a large computer monitor sitting on a tall white pedestal. It had a big, blue smiley-face on it. As the gang of four reached it, it blinked at them and smiled very widely.

‘What's your business with the Central Processor, my good programs?’ it asked in a voice like an advertisement for washing powder.

‘Important stuff, big blue,’ Sonic breezed. ‘Priority stuff. Isn't there any way we can jump this queue and get priority? Get on the guest list?’

‘I'm afraid not,’ said the face on the screen. ‘Everything here is controlled by the Operating System of Computer Planet Mobius — or CPM for short — and you've got to play by its rules.’

‘Even if that means waiting an age?’ asked Sonic.

‘That's right, citizen program. The wheels of CPM grind small and slow, as they say.’ The face's eyes closed and it appeared to have gone to sleep. Sonic sighed, tapped his foot and tried to peer ahead, to see how much longer the queue was and how much longer they might have to wait. At the end of a very long line, he could see a line of eight desks. Behind each one was a hovering, flashing light that pulsed on and off, and behind each of those was a wall, with a large circular hole in it, but where that led Sonic had no idea.

‘Those floating things are Bits,’ Iggy said from alongside him. ‘They're called that because they can only hold one bit of information at a time. Eight bits make a byte and half a byte is called a nybble.’

Tails's stomach rumbled again at the thought.

‘Trust our fat friend to use a computer with an eight-bit processor,’ Sonic scowled. ‘Too cheap to buy anything better— that's just like Robotnik!’ He jumped as the large monitor beside him flashed into life, and the smiling face woke up with wide eyes and a startled expression.

‘You mentioned the name of the Great Programmer Above!’ it said. ‘Does your business here concern him?’

‘Uh — you might say that, dude,’ Sonic said. ‘We're here — uh — because of something he's doing right now, and it's really urgent.’

‘Say no more!’ the monitor exclaimed and, as the startled group watched, it pushed itself off the pedestal. Before it hit the floor, it had grown two short, stumpy legs and two arms. ‘Follow me!’ Its screen flashed brightly as it walked into the cool shadows inside the massive

building. One of its hands produced a whistle, which it put to its screen mouth and blew loudly.

‘INTERRUPT! Hold everything! Priority instructions coming through! Priority! All multi-tasking programs to background!’ it declared. The queue parted as it marched through, followed by the four astonished friends, and pushed its way forward to the first of the eight desks.

‘Here you are, honoured priority programs,’ it said, bowing deeply. ‘I hope that your mission goes well. Do you think that the Greater Programmer might give me a reward for a job well done?’

‘Maybe,’ Sonic said. ‘Uh —this may be a stupid question, but what does a screen like you want out of life?’

The screen looked nervously about, and its voice dropped. ‘Don't tell anyone,’ it whispered, ‘but when I grow up, I want to be a joystick.’

Sonic nodded, trying to suppress a giggle. ‘Okay, dude. We'll mention you to the Great Programmer — he certainly is a great programmer, isn't he?’

‘Oh yes, Really great,’ Porker added.

‘Huge,’ Iggy said.

‘Enormous,’ Tails concluded

‘Oh, thank you,’ the monitor said. ‘Best of luck.’ It marched back across the floor and jumped up on to its pedestal. The four friends turned to the desk in front of them, and the Bit behind it.

‘What izz your bizznizz?’ it buzzed, flickering on and off. It looked and sounded like a faulty neon light.

Sonic turned to Iggy. ‘You handle this,’ he said. ‘You're better at the computer jargon than the rest of us.’

Iggy shrugged her shoulders and stepped forward, staring at the Bit. ‘We need information,’ she said.

‘Information,’ it buzzed back.

‘On a file location.’

‘File location.’

‘On virus eradication.’

‘Eradication.’

‘Anyone ever tell you you'd make a great backing singer, Bit baby?’ Porker interrupted. The Bit pulsed on and off, and suddenly sirens went off all over the inside of the huge building, illuminating it with red flashing lights.

Iggy spun around, an angry expression on her mousey face. ‘Porker, you lummo!’ she snapped. ‘You can't interrupt a Bit when it's being programmed, or you'll crash the system — like you just did. Now we've got to wait for the whole CPU to be reset.’

Porker looked down at his feet. ‘Sorry, Iggy. Didn't know. Won't do it again,’ he murmured, his voice difficult to hear over the wailing sirens.

Sonic looked around at the flashing lights, and then at Iggy. ‘How long will it take to reset?’ he asked.

‘There's no way of telling,’ Iggy said.

‘That's too long!’ the hedgehog exclaimed. ‘Come on, Tails. We'll find the information ourselves!’

‘No, wait! You can't! It's not safe in there! It's —’ Iggy shrieked, but Sonic had already vaulted over the Bit's desk and dived headfirst into the opening in the wall beyond it. The fox followed a moment later, his twin tails waving for a moment, and then they were both gone.

‘It's raw machine code — it's cyberspace,’ the mouse finished. A single tear trickled down her long pink nose as she stared at the hole that her hero and friend had disappeared into — possibly forever.



‘Whoooah!’ Sonic and Tails yelled in perfect unison, not for the first time. They plunged onwards and inwards, through a network of luminescent dots, lines of light in unthinkable complexity, ranged in the non-space of the CPU. Constellations and clusters of data, like the grid of a city at night, receded away to infinity in all directions around them. Blasts of hypercolour, jets and flashes of brightness circled and blazed around them, each following its own little mission within the brain of the

processor chip. The entire planet-spanning computer system was laid out in miniature before them, represented in lights and colours that played havoc with their senses. There was no up or down, or any need for one. There was only data: pure electronic information, formed into shapes of pulsating, solid colours, with gold tracks and traces threaded between them like a metal spider's web. It was like nothing, nothing at all that either of them had ever experienced before. Well, except for that movie they saw the other week.

‘Whoooah!’ they repeated, zipping down one of the lines of gold light, hurtling through the nebulous structures and patterns around them at incredible speed. Shapes wavered and changed, their designs developing like deep fractals. There was nothing solid around them, nothing to grab onto or hold the eye. It was like being hit over the head with a three-dimensional kaleidoscope. Look, it was pretty awesome, okay?

‘Whoah! Whoah! Whoooooooooah!’ they added.

The path they were on swirled, twisted and forked, dividing into two routes leading to two abstract shapes that hovered in the grid of lights. Sonic reached out, grabbed Tails's paw and yanked him down the left fork, heading towards an enormous, prickly star shape that wavered between orange and green. Its surface flickered with letters and numbers, a synopsis of data flashing past in abstract patterns faster than the eye could register. The golden thread looped them around the shape three times, and then zipped them off, back into the whirling grid.

‘Too bogus!’ shouted Tails.

‘Yeah! I just hope they don't use this for the Special Stage in the next game — we wouldn't have a chance!’ Sonic shouted back into his buddy's ear.

The space around them was filled with chattering sounds, tones, the clicking of relays and electronic squeals. Other blurs of light fled and chased each other down the golden threads, sometimes stopping, sometimes diving from one thread to another, or leaping from one into the surface of one of the huge blocks of information that studded the space like mad sculptures.

‘What are we looking for?’ Tails asked.

‘We don't know what the anti-virus looks like, so we've got to find something that'll tell us where it is. Some kind of program log, dude,’ replied Sonic.

‘What — you mean it's a log? It's big, it's heavy, it's wood?’ asked Tails, his face confused.

Sonic grinned back. ‘Naw, my literal lieutenant It's a list of what everything is and where to find it. I only wish we knew how to slow down in here.’

‘The speed's great!’ Tails said. ‘It's like being on a rollercoaster without any track, but as for the visuals — it's like something that weird monkey pal of yours, William Gibbon, might come up with.’

‘Yeah,’ agreed Sonic. ‘Or his feathered friend, Brucie Starling. Hey, what's that? Yaaargh!’

Something hurtled towards them, corkscrewing along the same golden thread, flashing with urgent lights. It was going to hit them. Tails closed his eyes. Sonic's gaze darted around him. Just ahead of them another gold thread passed just above their one — or was it below? It didn't matter. He grabbed Tails by the scruff of his furry neck and just as the oncoming light was about to hit them, he leaped across the open space towards the other cord, grabbing for it with his spare hand — and missed!

‘Whoooah!’ Sonic commented as he and Tails spiralled away from the network of cords, turning end over end in the strange medium of the cyberspace world. Faint lights zipped past them, none solid enough to grasp hold of. They seemed to be floating or falling away from the centre of the electronic mayhem, towards the edges where there was less activity, and almost nothing to grab.

Something flickered and shimmered around them, a digital mist that coalesced and solidified into waves of shifting space. Something that might have been a mouth wavered in front of them with an eerie grin on its insubstantial lips.

‘Who are you?’ it said in a low slow female tone that cut through the electronic babble and chatter like a knife.

‘I'm Sonic. He's Tails. What sort of program are you?’ the hedgehog asked. The disembodied mouth made him nervous, but he tried to hide

that.

‘A program?’ the mouth replied. ‘Oh, I’m not. At least, not now. I think I was one once... or possibly twice. It’s all so unclear now.’

‘If you’re not a program, what are you then?’ Sonic asked.

The mouth coughed. ‘I’m Psyche. I’m the ghost in the machine,’ it said.

‘An electronic ghost? The ghost of what?’ Tails demanded.

‘Of all the programs that have been deleted, of all the data that has been erased,’ the voice said with a tinge of sadness. ‘I lurk in here, gathering scraps and bits, digital flotsam and jetsam, and trying to disrupt the CPU’s work — although it’s only at times like this, when the central processor has crashed, that I can actually manifest and communicate. So what are you doing here? You’re not programs, I can tell that.’

‘We’re from outside the computer,’ Tails blurted out. Sonic tried to shush him, but the fox carried on. ‘We’re looking for a program log so we can find where Robotnik has stored his anti-virus program...’

‘Robotnik?’ asked the mouth of Psyche.

‘Yeah,’ Sonic said. ‘The Great Programmer Above, right?’

‘The Big Fat Fool, more like,’ Psyche spat. ‘He couldn’t program his way out of a paper bag!’ A large eye appeared out of the flickering mist, and winked at them, then disappeared again. The voice continued: ‘This was a nice organised computer system until Robotnik turned up. It was him who deleted me. Talking to you is very pleasant, you know. I’m so glad the system crashed.’

‘That was us,’ Tails said proudly.

‘Then thank you for your help.’ Psyche said. ‘One good turn deserves another: maybe I can help you find what you were after. What was it again?’

‘Log,’ Tails said.

‘Anti-virus,’ Sonic said.

‘Ah, everyone wants a log,’ the voice said. ‘I don’t know where the anti-virus is, but the log is stored in Robotnik’s personal file space. I can

help you get there.'

'You can?' Sonic said. 'Excellent stuff, vaporous dude! How come?'

'I have a few powers,' Psyche said. 'A bit of Cobol and Basic, blended with some voodoo and a little digital alchemy. It'll do the job.' The flickering mist moved around them, caught them in a soft grasp and steered them towards one of the few gold threads in that sector of cyberspace. 'Catch hold of this, and follow it. When you see Robotnik's data-structure, jump off and aim for its face. It's in there somewhere. Best of luck. Come back and see me sometime.'

'Roger dokey, old girl. Thanks for your help,' Tails said. He and Sonic stretched out and grabbed the light-wire as they passed it, and a second later they were hurtling along it at speed.

The electronic mist faded into nothingness behind them, with a faint final cry of 'Good-bye!'

'Nice lady, that Psyche,' Tails said.

'Weird,' Sonic said. 'How are we going to recognise Robotnik's data-structure anyway?'

'I don't know, ' Tails said as they whipped around the side of a brown and silver data-tower that looked like the skeleton of a golf ball. 'Ah, yes I do. Robotnik's personal data-structure, dead ahead.'

It was obviously Robotnik's personal place, because it looked just like him. Two spindly black towers supported an enormous sphere, the bottom half black and the top half red. Two more thin towers stuck out from its side and on top was another sphere, this one of pinkish with bits growing out of it— ears, a nose, a mouth curved into an unpleasant expression that was half smile and half snarl, and an enormous bushy moustache with static electricity crackling from its ends. Gold wires looped around and about it, and the enormous figure looked as if it was trapped in a cocoon of the finest webbing, fighting to get out.

'Whale in one!' Sonic cried. 'That Psyche babe knows her stuff. Jump for the face, she said.' The thread they were on curved around and upwards, circling the structure's enormous belly, upwards, under its armpit and then back over its shoulder in a tight bend, to dive past its huge face.

‘Ready?’ They were approaching it really fast, too fast for a real countdown. ‘Count zero, then jump. Zero!’

‘Whooah!’ Tails commented as the two heroes leaped off the thread, heading towards the massive face of the digital Robotnik. They plunged towards it, twisting and somersaulting as they fell.

‘We’re going to hit its nose — no, the moustache!’ shouted Sonic. ‘No! Heinous! We’re going in — we’re going UP ITS NOSE! Aaaargh! The horror! The horror!’

‘Whoooooah!’ Tails yelled one last time for luck. The cavernous opening of one of Robotnik’s nostrils yawned in front of them and they felt themselves being sucked into the darkness and the strangeness that lay beyond.



They came to a solid stop on something that was soft and rubbery. It felt like landing on the inside of someone’s nose might feel, and it was completely dark. Sonic sat up and felt around.

‘Tails?’ he said.

‘Over here, dude,’ came his friend’s voice. ‘I can’t see anything. Wish there was something here to give us some light.’

Suddenly, there was something: a blinking, flashing, light that hovered between them. ‘Yezzz?’ it buzzed.

Sonic recognised it. ‘It’s a Bit!’ he exclaimed. ‘Cool! I’ve got to remember how to get it to do what I want — what did Iggy say? Only one piece of information at a time. Okay, Bit, we need information.’

‘Information,’ buzzed the flashing dot.

‘On a program’s current location.’

‘Location.’

‘It’s the program log.’

‘I am the program log Bit,’ fizzed the Bit.

‘Wa-hey! Not bad!’ Tails exclaimed from the other side of the small room where they were.

Sonic grinned in the half-light. 'It's better than bad, it's good, dude!' he said. 'Okay, log Bit or bit of log or whatever you are...'

'Yezzz?'

'We need to find another location.'

'Location.'

'Of the anti-virus program.'

'Location of anti-virus,' buzzed the Bit. 'Confirmed. Relocating you.'

Tails glanced at Sonic. '"Whooooah" or "Yaaargh"?' he asked.

'Your choice, dude,' Sonic said dryly.

The Bit pulsed with an incredibly bright flash of light, and suddenly the two friends were hurtling back out of Robotnik's data-structure, into the weirdness of cyberspace again.

'Whooooah!' Sonic decided. The gold cord they were on dived straight downwards from where they were, plunging them towards the feet of the massive Robotnik structure and beyond, into the depths of the darkness. The thread spiralled around and around, then straightened out, heading for the side of a slim, flat, very dark shape, so dark it was almost impossible to see unless you were heading straight for it. Which the two heroes were. Very fast indeed.

'Yaaargh!' Tails decided. 'Yaaaaaaaaaargh! Yaa — Oh, we've stopped.'

They had slammed to a halt just before they smacked into the side of the shape. Sonic carefully put a foot out towards it, and found himself slipping across its surface, unable to control himself. In a moment he had slipped over and was sliding on his front towards the edge. It was cold and slightly damp against his skin.

'It's-covered in ice — black ice!' he yelled. 'Be very, very careful! Use your tails to manoeuvre — don't tread on it! He saw the edge of the shape zipping towards him. There seemed to be some kind of lip or projection there and, as he was about to fly out into the space beyond, he reached out with both paws and grabbed it. His fingers held tight, but his speed pulled his body off the edge and flipped it over, on to the other side of the dark shape.

There was a whirring from above and Tails, using his tails like a helicopter, spun into view. Sonic grabbed his outstretched paw and was lifted safely off. The hedgehog seemed almost weightless in the weird stuff of cyberspace. The two friends hovered a few metres above the surface and stared at it.

‘I don't get it,’ Tails said. ‘The gold cord led us straight here, but we can't get into the data, because we can't get through the ice.’

‘Right,’ Sonic said. ‘It's gotta be some kind of defence. There must be something we ought to have that would let us through, but we don't have time to find out what that is.’

‘Or any way of smashing through the ice,’ Tails said.

‘Maybe not smashing it,’ Sonic said, ‘but there may be another way.’ He bend down, untied his shoes, took them off and passed them to Tails.

‘What are you doing?’ asked the astonished fox.

‘Doctor Kintobor made me these shoes,’ the hedgehog said. ‘They've got special soles, to cut down on friction, so they don't overheat when I'm really running fast. But if you hang on to me, and I run on the spot without them —’

‘Then the ice will melt from the heat!’ Tails finished. ‘Great plan, my old mucker.’ He put the shoes under one arm, gripped Sonic by the shoulders and lowered him towards the cold surface of the structure below. The hedgehog's feet touched down, and he immediately began to race forward, pounding against the ice as fast as he could. Because the ice was so smooth his feet just slipped across it and he didn't move forward, but Tails could see that where he was running, the surface was already beginning to melt.

‘Keep it up!’ he urged. ‘It's working!’ A spray of water from Sonic's flying feet shot up, drenching the flying fox. ‘Bleugh! I wish I'd brought my mac,’ he said. The melted hole in the ice was getting deeper and deeper by the second as the hedgehog kept going. Suddenly there was a slurping noise and the small pool of water was sucked down into the thing below the layer of ice. Tails just had time to say ‘We've done it!’ before they were sucked into it as well.



Inside, the structure looked completely different. It was not large and fiat, it was small and square, and looked a lot like an office. In the middle of the floor was a desk, and on the desk was a box. While Sonic sat in one corner pulling his slightly damp shoes on again, Tails walked over and looked at the box. There was a label on its lid which read '*Doctor Robotnik's Anti-Virus Toolkit*'.

'Fab! Gear! Bonzer! We found it!' he exclaimed, pulling it open. Inside was something that looked like a cross between a syringe and a staplegun. Tails looked at it and was about to pull the trigger when Sonic stopped him with a paw on his shoulder.

'I've seen something like this before,' he said. 'It's used for giving people injections. The medicine goes in here —' he pointed '— and then you put this bit against your arm and pull the trigger.'

'But there's no medicine with it!' wailed the fox. 'We're sunk. All that effort for nothing! We're stuck in here forever!' Sonic tapped him on the nose with a small glass bottle.

'It was in the box, dude,' he said. 'You should have looked harder.'

Bashfully, Tails took the small bottle of medicine from Sonic and stared at it. 'Weird,' he said. 'It's a clear liquid, but it's got all these little strings of numbers and letters floating in it.'

'You don't think you cure a computer virus with a normal medicine, do you?' Sonic said. 'We've wasted enough time — let's go and find Iggy and Porker, and get out of here.'

'And you can do that, can you?' asked Tails.

'Nope,' Sonic said. 'But I know a ghost who can. PSYCHE!'

There was a tense moment and then, just as Tails was about to put his hands on his hips and call Sonic something rude about fleas and camels and armpits that he'd heard in a movie, a white mist began to fade into view before them.

'The computer's coming back on-line,' the faint female voice of Psyche said. 'I haven't got much time before I'm powerless again. How can

I help you?’

‘Get us back outside the CPU! Please!’ Sonic said. There was a flash, a brief sensation of unspeakable speed as they flashed from one infinite end of cyberspace to the other, and then a strange popping feeling as they rolled out of the opening in the wall behind the Bit's desk, and on to the floor at the feet of a startled Iggy and Porker.

‘Sonic! Tails! What happened?’ asked the mouse.

‘We got it,’ Sonic said, brandishing the anti-virus injector. ‘How long were we in there? Half an hour?’

‘About six seconds,’ said Porker.

‘Whoooah! Excellent time-keeping, dude. If you ever needed proof I'm the fastest hedgehog in existence, you just saw it. Now let's go — programs are running, time's a-wasting and most importantly I'm hungry.’

Together the four friends headed towards the exit of the enormous CPU building, and the bright orange sky outside, past the queue of waiting programs.

‘Hang on a sec,’ Tails said. ‘There's one other thing we need.’ He had seen one of the multi-sided crystal robots at the end of the queue, and walked up to it.

‘Hi,’ he said. ‘What kind of program are you?’

‘I am an accountancy and bookkeeping routine,’ responded the crystal program in a voice like chiming bells. Tails grinned.

‘Bet that's boring,’ he said. ‘How would you like to become a Bit instead?’

‘That sounds interesting,’ the crystal answered. ‘But how is that possible?’

‘Hold still and close your eyes,’ Tails said, and brought his fist down on top of the program's head with a thump. It shattered into thousands of tiny pieces which tinkled down across the metal ground.

‘There you go,’ Tails grinned. ‘You're lots of bits now.’ He bent down and picked up the black handset which lay in the middle of the wreckage, and scampered back to the others.

‘We need one of these to activate the output device,’ he explained. ‘Now we can go.’



One long dash later, the friends found themselves standing in front of the huge eyeball of the Output Device. Tails stared up at its cyclopean features, deep in thought.

‘Come on, Tails,’ Porker said. ‘Press the button and get us out of here, like you did last time.’

‘No, wait,’ Tails replied. ‘If Sonic's right and the Wing Fortress complex was blown up, the output device we used last time must have been destroyed too. Who knows where we'll come out?’

‘Only one way to find out,’ Sonic said, grabbing the handset from Tails, and pressing the ‘Activate’ button!

The output device whirred and whined, turned to stare at them, and there was the familiar sucking feeling as it began to draw them up, through the air towards its huge black pupil. They disappeared into the darkness inside, there was a momentary feeling of being everywhere and nowhere at the same time, and suddenly they were tumbling out of the slot in the front of a tall white output device, and onto a cold metal floor. Iggy, the first out, looked around her at the shining metal walkways, the tall rectangular buildings and the strange shades of colour in the sky.

‘Oh no!’ she lamented. ‘It hasn't worked: we're still inside the computer!’

‘Hey, chill out,’ Sonic said. ‘This ain't no computer, this is the Scrap Brain Zone. It's about as far from home as we could have got, but it could be worse. Okay, everyone line up and get your shots.’ He waved the anti-virus injector at them.

‘I hope you know what you're doing with that,’ Porker said. ‘Ow!’

‘I don't think he does,’ Iggy added. ‘Ow!’

‘It's okay,’ Tails sympathised. ‘Ow! Now I get my revenge, and inject him!’

‘OW!’ Sonic said, rubbing his arm. ‘Next thing we need is a computer terminal.’

‘Like this one?’ Porker asked, pointing.

‘Perfect,’ Sonic said. ‘Okay, Iggy, you see if you can find Sally Acorn and the others inside the computer network, get them to the Output Device and get them out. Porker will guard you, while Tails and I will go off and see if we can work out what Robotnik's been doing while we've been stuck inside his machines. Let's go!’

10

GARBAGE IN, GARBAGE OUT

A few minutes later, Sonic and Tails returned to where Iggy and Porker were waiting by the computer. Sonic shook his head in bewilderment.

‘It's bizarro out there,’ he said. ‘It's dead quiet and totally still too. Most of the machines aren't running, and there's no sign of a single badnik — not a one, not even a single solitary Caterkiller. It's like the whole place has been deserted — it looked just like it did after the last time Tails and me beat up Robotnik and trashed his robot control systems.’

‘Or like all the energy is being diverted for another reason, to power something else,’ Iggy reasoned. ‘If it's important, we'll find out soon enough. Now, are you ready to inoculate everyone as I bring them out of the computer through the Output Device?’

‘You got ‘em? Brilliant!’ Sonic exclaimed. ‘Hit the button and pull them out — I'm ready and waiting.’ He stood by the slot in the side of the white block of the Output Device, the anti-virus injector ready in his paw, and waited for the first arrival.

The machine whirred faintly, there was a clunk from deep inside it, and then a muffled squeal and a thud as one of Johnny Lightfoot's many relations fell out of the slot. Sonic helped up the startled rabbit, dusted it down and gave it a shot of anti-virus in the arm. It hopped off, happy enough and none the worse for its experience. The machine clunked again, and a squirrel fell out of the slot. Again, Sonic welcomed it back to reality and gave it a shot in the arm. Clunk; a bluebird. ‘Welcome back’; shot in the wing; ‘Ow!’. Clunk; a walrus. ‘Welcome back, dude’; shot in the flipper; ‘Ow!’. Clunk; a chicken. ‘Welcome back...’

The process continued on and on as, one by one, the rightful inhabitants of the zones returned home. Sonic's trigger finger was

beginning to tire as the stream of small, fluffy, furry, feathered friends carried on and on.

Sally Acorn came through, and reassured Sonic that nothing bad had happened to them in the labyrinth of passages in the Games Directory, and went off to look after some of the littlest creatures. Each animal stood around for a few minutes, letting the surprise of being back in reality wear off, and then hopped, ran, burrowed or flew back to its home zone, leaving the hard-working four — Sonic, Tails, Iggy and Porker — to keep going. After Porker's girlfriend Jilly the Pig had emerged from the output device, he went off as well and there were only the three of them left.

Clunk! Sonic bent down automatically, helped the creature to its feet and gave it a shot in the arm. 'Ribbet,' it said gratefully and hopped away. Sonic watched it go with a quizzical expression on his face.

'Do we have any frogs around here?' he asked. 'I don't remember seeing any of them inside the computer with us.'

'Nope, no frogs,' Iggy said, still typing commands into the computer. 'The closest we got to frogs was in that *Froggy* game in the Games Directory.'

'Stop that frog!' Sonic shouted.

Tails leaped after it, but the agile amphibian put on a burst of speed and almost eluded him, until he was able to drive it into a corner. He picked it up in both paws and carried it back to Sonic, who looked at it.

'Iggy, what do you make of this?' he asked.

The mouse peered at the squirming animal in Tails's paws. 'Curious,' she said. 'It's still got that computer graphics look to it, with the blocky colours and the slightly jagged lines, but none of the others looked like that.'

'Exactly,' Sonic said. 'Tails, my foxy forensic friend, would you say that's a slimy frog or not?'

'Squirmy, yes. Slimy, no,' Tails said. 'It's dry to the touch.'

'Then it's not a real frog,' Sonic said. 'It is the frog from the *Froggy* game — us going into its game must have pushed it out into the rest of the computer, and it followed the others out. Or something.'

‘I think that's a something,’ Iggy said. Behind them, the output device went clunk again, this time much louder than before. Then it did it again, three times. The three animals spun round, startled. Tails dropped the frog, which ribbitted happily and hopped off, heading for the Aquatic Ruin Zone.

Standing in front of the output device were four figures. All of them were human, all of them were tall and powerfully built, and all four had the grainy, gritty look of computer-created characters. Sonic recognised one of them: a girl wearing a blue dress with brown leggings and a white head-dress.

‘Chin Lie, from *Road Warriors Two: Champions Only!*’ he exclaimed.

‘So, hedgehog-san, we meet again, ‘ the girl said, speaking in a low, controlled voice. ‘This time I have brought friends with me, to make sure that you will defend your honour by standing and fighting, not running away as you did before. Are you ready?’

Sonic took a step back and studied the other three figures. One was a very tall, very muscular man with his hair cut in a low mohawk style. He had a thick beard and wore nothing but red boots and shorts. On his chest was a strange tattoo that looked like a huge bear's paw-print. The second man was not really muscular, he was just big and broad, and Sonic thought for a moment that it might be Robotnik wearing only a pale blue skirt, but then Robotnik would never stand and fight him, nor did he have thick black hair in an ornate style, as this warrior did. The third of the fighters wore a red and black uniform, with a peaked cap and heavy gauntlets. Under the brim of his cap, his face was sheer sneering evil. Of the four, he looked the toughest, as if he could eat Sonic for breakfast and still have room for Tails as a mid-morning snack. But the hedgehog was never one to admit defeat before a fight had started. He had watched Chin Lie the last time she had fought him, and was pretty sure that once he knew her moves, he could avoid them and beat her with his own speciality — the super-sonic spin attack.

‘I'm ready,’ he said grimly, standing to face her side-on, his paws drawn up in a karate-fighting stance, taking deep breaths to prepare himself for the fight. The four opponents facing him stepped back and, with a single throated roar, they all charged forward at him!

Sonic was not expecting that, but he did the only thing he could think of in the circumstances: he flung himself high into the air. The four warriors hurtled underneath his spinning body, trying to slow down their headlong charge. Chin Lie was the first to stop, which made her Sonic's first target. He bounced off her forehead and spun back into the air, waiting for her to collapse to the ground. She didn't. Instead she jumped into the air after him, reaching out her arms to grab Sonic and hurl him to the ground.

A whizzing, whirling ball of orange fur shot across the scene. It leaped into the air to bounce swiftly off the heads of the muscular one, the large one and the uniformed one, and unfurled just in time to knock Chin Lie away from sonic. It was Tails. He dropped to the ground and Sonic landed beside him a moment later.

‘Nice moves, dude,’ he said. ‘The bad news is I think all we've done so far is get them riled.’ They certainly looked like it: each of the four advancing warriors wore an expression of rage or anger. Suddenly their path was blocked by the figure of a small white mouse, holding a black object that was only just smaller than she was. Tails recognised what it was: the handset he had taken from the multi-sided accountancy program.

‘Hold it right there!’ Iggy snarled squeakily, waving the handset menacingly at the four approaching figures. ‘This is a Security Level 10 handset, one of the most powerful handsets in the computer. I can use it to deactivate you guys — or delete you completely. Now, in the excitement I kinda lost count of how many charges we used up inside there.’ Iggy gave Sonic and Tails a quick wink. ‘So the question you have to ask yourselves is this: do I feel lucky? Well, do ya, cyberpunks?’

There was a clunk from behind her and Iggy jumped, startled. In that split second, the sinister warrior in the red uniform leaped across the open space, kicking the handset out of her hands and into the air. It flew up, twisting end over end, over the heads of the two groups. Sonic tensed his knees and sprang into the air towards it. So did Tails, Chin Lie and the uniformed guy. The four of them hurtled skywards, all reaching up and trying to grab the small device.

None of them got it. From the ground a long, thin brown arm shot out, its length strangely stretched out to two or three times what it should be. Just as Sonic was about to grab it, the hand at the end of the

extraordinary arm snatched the handset out of the air from above him and pulled it away. Sonic dropped to the ground and whirled around to stare at the new arrival.

It was more than one arrival: it was three of them. The one with the handset clasped in his hands was a tall, thin bald man with dark skin, sinewy muscles all over his body, strange marks on his skull that might be paint or tattoos, and a necklace with human skulls around his neck! To his left stood another tall, thin man, this one with a long pigtail of blond hair curling down his back. He wore a white mask that completely hid his face, and on his left fist was a gauntlet with long, cruel, curved hooks looping from its back. To the right was a man, taller than the other two but more muscular. His skin was deeply tanned and he wore little except for a pair of blue shorts, but there was a deep scar burned across his chest, as if he had been hit by a thunderbolt there. They looked mean.

The man with the handset stepped forward. 'If you want it, better come and get it,' he said in an exotic accent, waving the handset enticingly at the three friends who stood surrounded by the muscular figures of the warriors. Tails was about to take up his offer and dash forward, but Sonic grabbed him by the shoulder before he could.

'Dude, that's Dhalgren, from *Road Warrior Two: Champions Only*,' he hissed. 'They're all from *Road Warrior Two*. One of them almost beat me — there's no way we can take out all seven, so don't look for a way to do it, look for a way to escape.'

'But we could defeat them if we had the handset,' Tails insisted. 'We've got to get it back! Oh no!'

Dhalgren must have overheard the fox's excited squealing, as he grinned with a smile as cold as those on the skulls around his neck, and slowly squeezed his fist closed around the handset. The black box's case burst with a pop and a brief fizz of short-circuiting electronics. The tall Indian dropped the remains to the ground.

'Finish them, my road-warrior crew!' shouted a familiar voice from overhead. Hovering several metres above Sonic, his friends and the martial artists who were surrounded them, was the underside of Robotnik's personal aircar, the Egg-o-Matic. A fat face with a huge moustache bent over the side, looking down at them and laughing gleefully.

‘Ha ha ha! So, Sonic and Tails, and you little white what’s-your-name too, you managed to get out of my machine code snares. I congratulate you on your cleverness. Unfortunately for you — ha ha ha! — you weren’t clever enough to see that once I had my network of output devices working, my programmed protagonists would be able to track you down and delete you, whether you were inside the chips or out. Ha ha ha! Chips! You’ve had ‘em, Sonic!’

‘You didn’t program these characters, you nicked them from a video game!’ the hedgehog taunted. ‘So that’s all your evil plan was — to get rid of me?’

‘Don’t flatter yourself, you misbegotten mammal! No! Of course not — although it was a good place to start. No, I’ve decided to replace my robot badniks with computerised badniks instead. Ha ha ha ha! They’re so much more efficient — no nasty oil stains, they’re easily reprogrammed and they come in better colours! In a few hours, the entire planet will be covered with them, and then my reign as Supreme Emperor of Mobius will begin!’ The Egg-o-Matic began to shake in the air as Robotnik laughed hysterically at his own cleverness. Behind him, there was a clunk as the output device began to bring another item from out of the computer’s memory into the real world.

‘You’ll never succeed!’ yelled Sonic, shaking a defiant fist at the rotund researcher above him.

‘I will! Ha ha — I already have! The first thing all my computerniks are programmed to do is to hunt down you and all your nauseatingly cute friends, and throw you back into the computer, into the deepest, darkest memory dump on the system! And you know what? I’m even going to steal your RAVAGE tank design to help me do it!’

‘You’re too late, sweetgut!’ boomed an amplified voice that Sonic recognised. There, at the edge of the circle of aggressive road warriors, stood the enormous shape of the silver RAVAGE tank, sitting on the remains of the output device that it had emerged from. Sonic wondered briefly how something so big came out of something so small, but decided it probably worked the same way as getting big-screen movie pictures out of a small projector, and besides it wasn’t important right at the moment anyway. A familiar blue head was sticking out of the tank’s main turret.

‘Sonic Two!’ Tails shouted happily.

‘Looks like you dudes could do with a hand,’ shouted their friend from the Virtual Green Hill Zone. ‘I found the program for this cool tank, and thought I’d bring it with me. Oh yeah, I brought some friends too.’

‘Not more froggies or wabbits, please.’ Sonic muttered under his breath, and then gasped as five human figures leaped from hatchways and doors on the surface of the tank, and dived down towards the martial artists on the ground. There was a dark-haired man with a white karate suit, a blond man in a red karate suit, two other guys moving too fast to be seen and something huge and green that looked like the Incredible Bulk with flaming red hair.

For a second the two groups stared at each other, then dropped into fighting crouches and sprang into the attack. The air in front of the tank was filled with flashing fists, lashing feet, flying bodies, balls of *chi*-summoned flame energy, thuds, groans and more special attacks than Sonic really wanted to watch. He leaped up on to the ladder on the side of the tank and ran up it, followed by Tails and Iggy. The other Sonic ran towards them, his computer-generated colours looking strange under the real sunlight of the Zone.

‘Well met by sunlight, my excellent friends,’ he grinned. ‘Nice place you’ve got here.’

‘No time for that now,’ Sonic commanded. ‘Everyone, get to the guns. We’ve got to stop this home-grown *Road Warrior* tournament right now, before the side with more players wins.’ They dived for the gun emplacements.

From overhead there was a loud ‘Bah!’ as Robotnik soared higher in his Egg-o-Matic, watching the combat from far above.

‘Fire!’ yelled Sonic, and the three friends and their programmable pal let rip and their cannons and lasers into the melee on the ground below them. The DEBUG lasers which had been so useful against the Buzz Bombers and Buzzers inside the computer did almost nothing at all, but the DELETE cannons were doing major damage, each one tearing chunks out of the Zone’s metal floor. Sonic scored the first hit: a blast from his cannon

hit the bulbous oriental man in the middle of his broad belly, and with an electronic shriek the figure shrank to a point of light and disappeared.

‘Cowabunga! Nailed him!’ the hedgehog shouted, then turned back to blasting at the fight, just in time to see a shot from Tails's email-gun strike the powerful fighter with the flat-topped haircut, just as he was about to put paid to the guy in the red uniform. Flat-top yelled and disappeared.

‘Oh, nice work,’ Sonic yelled sarcastically. ‘Pay attention, dimbo!’ Below them, the battle raged on. Smoke from the WINDOWS sleep-gas drifted across the scene of the combat, lit eerily by the flashes from stun-grenades and cannon blasts. After almost a minute, there were only two or three figures left on the ground below, and their clothes were torn from the fight and scorched from the weapons.

‘Finish them off!’ Tails shouted, then looked up as his sharp foxy ears picked up a hostile cackle from above his head, just audible over the noise of the battle. Above the RAVAGE tank flew Robotnik in his Egg-o-Matic and, as the fox watched, a small trapdoor opened in the bottom of the machine. Just visible inside it was the shape of a large bomb. Tails recognised it: he had seen one just like it when he had been building the RAVAGE tank.

‘Look out! Robotnik's got a REFORMAT bomb!’ Tails cried and leaped from behind his gun, heading towards the main turret and the controls of the tank's two main cannons. He knew the blasts of binary energy from his lasers would just reflect off the Egg-o-Matic's shiny underside, but the heavy shells from the two huge guns would blow the tiny ping-pong ball of a plane out of the air. But before he could get there, there was a click from above and the bomb dropped towards the top of the tank.

Tails swerved around, grabbed Iggy from where she was sitting behind an OS/2 grenade launcher, dashed for the side of the tank and dived off, whirling his tails into action to break their fall and carry them as far from the bomb blast as possible. They touched down on the metal floor, and as Iggy scrambled out of Tails's grasp, there were two gentle plops behind him as the two Sonics landed. The four of them cowered down, waiting for the explosion.

But there was no big bang, just a distant noise like the cracking of a metal eggshell, and then a few moments later a faint blue-white light began to glow over the edge of the tank. It crept onwards, forming itself into a large ball that grew larger and larger, expanding outwards from the top of the tank. Everywhere the edges of the ball touched, the shining surface of the RAVAGE tank disappeared, disintegrated by the force of the REFORMAT program which had been contained in the weird bomb.

Sonic and the others backed away as the edges of the ball broke through the sides of the tank, exposing the programming codes that held its insides together, and reached the metal floor of the Scrap Brain Zone. It fizzed and sizzled with faint electricity here but did not disintegrate the floor, but that did not stop its slow and steady expansion. Its edge spread onwards towards the three remaining road warriors who were still fighting, 'and touched the foot of the tall man in the mask with the claws on his glove. The heroes gasped in horror as he was drawn into the ball and disintegrated, flickering and disappearing like a switched-off TV picture.

The four of them retreated as the edge of the ball moved towards where they were standing. Tails shrugged his shoulders. 'It's okay,' he said. 'It only affects computer programs. We're normal now — we're okay.'

'We're okay,' Iggy said, 'but what about computer-Sonic here?' The fuzzy hedgehog was moving away as they spoke, but in a few more steps he would be backed into a corner by the approaching edge, with no way out.

'Sonic!' Sonic shouted, hit by a sudden brainwave. 'Get back into the computer! It's your only hope!'

The computerised hedgehog heard him, and dived past the approaching edge of the REFORMAT ball towards the only computer within sight. Without looking back, he threw himself at the screen and disappeared into it. Colours swirled on it for a second and then, as the edge of the ball enveloped it, it exploded.

'Think he's okay?' Tails asked.

'Hope so,' Sonic said grimly. 'Ooh, that felt weeeird!' The edge of the program's ball of energy had passed over him before he had noticed, giving him a strange tingling feeling through his spikes, and then it disappeared

with a very faint pop. The remaining martial arts fighters had also vanished, erased by the REFORMAT, and the only sound left in the zone was the humming of the Egg-o-Matic's engines and the laughter of Robotnik from far above.

‘Foolish creatures! Ha ha ha! You think you've won, but I have not yet begun to fight!’ He leant over the edge of his aircraft and produced a small black box with a keypad and a big red button on it. Pointing it downwards at them, he pressed the button.

A small point of light appeared between Sonic and Tails, flashing red, green and blue, and then suddenly began to expand, twisting and changing to form a new shape. In a moment it was full size: a full-size Chop Chop badnik, the hideous robot fish with more mouth than body, from the Aquatic Ruin Zone. It fell to the metal floor with a crash and lay there, flopping in the air. Sonic looked at it, put his hands on his hips and stared up at Robotnik.

‘Oh yeah, very impressive, that,’ he dead-panned. ‘We're all totally scared of your killer kipper, dude. In case you hadn't noticed, this zone has no water in it.’

‘BAH!’ Robotnik exclaimed, pressing new codes into the black box.

Tails looked at the fish on the ground in front of him. ‘Better get rid of this,’ he said. ‘It might bite someone. Besides, a tidy zone is a happy zone.’ He spun himself into a super-dash, and smacked into the digitally created fish. It exploded into a thousand pieces which flew outwards, sparkling in the light. They slowed, hung in the air for a moment, then began to move back together again, like an explosion in reverse or a very fast jigsaw puzzle. In a few moments the Chop Chop lay in front of them again, still flopping and gasping on the metal. Tails looked at it.

‘Uh oh,’ he said.

‘Double uh oh,’ Sonic amended as another red, green and blue point of light formed before them, and swiftly expanded to become a Grounder. Normally one Grounder would be no problem, but if it automatically rebuilt itself every time he destroyed it, they'd be in trouble.

‘Ha ha ha ha ha!’ Robotnik guffawed from overhead, pressing the button again. ‘You asinine animals! Meet my new, all-computerised

badniks! Now you know why they're better than the normal robot versions — you can't destroy them. Ten out of ten hedgehogs surveyed said they didn't like them, and in two hours every zone on this planet will be full of them! And you didn't know I had a pocket output device, did you? Perfect for those long journeys and breaking the ice at parties!' He pressed the button on his black box again, and let out another gale of laughter.

'Nobody ever invites you to parties, Robotnik!' Sonic grunted, fending off an attack from a Buzzer which had just expanded from the latest blob of light. Four of the new badniks were attacking now, but as soon as Sonic or Tails smashed them, they reformed just as strong as before.

'I know!' Robotnik yelled back from the safety of his Egg-o-Matic. 'That's why I'm so bitter and twisted. A decent social life and I'd have been perfectly normal and well adjusted, but no! Nobody ever invited me out, and I was stuck in my laboratory. Then the hideous accident turned me into me, and you can bet I'm furious about it! Take that! And that! And that!'

Three blobs of light appeared, forming into two Coconuts and one Shellcraker. Sonic immediately charged into them with a spin attack, but their pieces flew back together, reforming almost immediately. It was obvious that the heroes were fighting a losing battle.

'And for my next trick— you all die!' Robotnik shouted. He jabbed the red button and the crowd of badniks stopped their attack and began to move together. Their metal hides clanked against each other, and then melted, flowing together, growing upwards into one fearsome shape. It looked like a giant scorpion with a long neck, two powerful pincer arms and a massive cannon mounted on its tail, aimed directly at the three friends.

'Robotnik Industries announces their newest badnik — the Scipio! I've spent months programming it, just to get rid of you troublemakers!' yelled the mad scientist. 'Scipio, attack!'

The huge new badnik lunged forward with one pincer, snatching Iggy from where she stood. Tails immediately leaped to her rescue but the Scipio reacted faster than he acted, snapping its other pincer around his whirling tails and snatching him out of the air so that he hung from its claw like a furry Christmas tree decoration. The huge cannon on the Scipio's tail

shifted from side to side, aiming directly at Sonic. The hedgehog gulped as something clicked inside it.

‘Finish them!’ Robotnik ordered.

The Scipio clicked again, moved forward one pace, and stopped. Something started ticking very fast inside it.

‘Eh? Eh?’ the insane inventor exclaimed, hammering the buttons on his black box with a pudgy finger. With a sharp bang, it exploded in his hand, covering his face and front with black soot and burn marks. ‘Blankety blank!’ he swore. ‘Oh bleep bleep-bleep, bleeeeeeeeep!’

Sonic's eyes were on the Scipio. Its shiny metal skin was growing fuzzy, melting and fading away. Lines of static jumped across its surface, and then with a flicker and a hiss of white noise it dissolved into thin air. A surprised and grateful Iggy and Tails dropped to the ground.

‘I wonder why it did that?’ the fox wondered. ‘Very odd.’

Sonic's attention was taken by something else. Against the side of the corridor, the remains of the computer that had been exploded by the REFORMAT bomb were glowing. As he watched, the pieces rose slowly into the air and begun to circle around in a tight formation, zooming back into the base of the shattered monitor. The smashed computerised badniks had done the same thing, and the hedgehog tensed himself to attack in case anything went wrong.

The computer reformed without even a crack, and its screen clicked on, filling with a weird pattern. Suddenly a familiar face appeared in front of it, grinning widely.

‘Sonic Two!’ Sonic said. ‘You made it, dude!’

‘Better than that, I saved your bacon, coolest of dudes,’ the digital face on the screen beamed. ‘When I jumped into the screen, it dropped me straight into the CPU. And I met someone who says she's a friend of yours in here.’

‘A friend?’ Tails pondered dimly. ‘Who?’

Next to the computerised hedgehog, a white mist began to swirl and form. A large pair of lips appeared in the middle of it. ‘Hi,’ they said faintly. ‘Remember me?’

‘Psyche!’ Sonic said, punching the air and whooping. ‘Excellent!’

‘Better than that,’ said the computer Sonic. ‘I told this ghostly babe what was going down out here, and she told me where all Robotnik's crucial files were. Then the two of us totalled the lot. Utter deletion. Nothing left. Totalled. Then we blew up every output device in the place and generally trashed all his bad programs. The computer's neater than your haircut now, dude.’

‘So that's why the Scipio disappeared,’ Iggy said. ‘Nice work, you two.’

‘Oh, you did all the hard .work, and you gave me the idea,’ Psyche said. ‘But the best bit is still to come. Look upwards, erm, dudes, and enjoy the show.’

They did so. Robotnik was still hovering there in his Egg-o-Matic, shaking his fist and yelling threats and rude words. As they watched, there was a loud *phut!*, the back end of the tubby craft exploded in a series of blasts, and the Egg-o-Matic fell out of the sky.

‘Bah!’ yelled Robotnik again, and pressed a button. The front and back of the small plane cracked apart and fell off, leaving the fat controller hanging in mid-air. He had a jet-pack strapped to his back.

‘You haven't seen the last of me!’ he shouted, and pressed the control. The straining jets ignited and blasted him away towards the horizon; but he must have strapped it on backwards because he was flying feet-first. The friends watched the reflection of the sunlight off his shiny bald patch disappearing into the distance, then turned back to the screen.

‘So the computer network's safe now?’ Sonic asked.

‘Totally!’ Psyche said. ‘We've cleaned it of all Robotnik's influences.’

‘Groovy, daddy-o,’ Tails said, ignoring Sonic's pained expression. ‘Since you guys can't get out now, do you want to be the official guardians of the computer? You'd patrol it, and be in charge of checking that Robotnik and his badniks never invade again, like Sonic and I do out here?’

Psyche and the other Sonic looked at each other for a moment, and then looked back. ‘Of course,’ they said together.

‘Awesome!’ Sonic smiled. ‘Iggy, I appoint you official liaison with this excellent other Sonic and the most coolest ghost in the machine. Stay in contact with them, using the computer network, and let Tails and me know if anything develops.’

The white mouse stood to attention and saluted him. ‘Aye aye, sir!’ she grinned. ‘Anything strange happens, I’ll run straight to Tails. No problem. Dudes.’

‘Cool!’ Tails said. ‘That wraps just about everything up. So now, Sonic, since I’ve been really starving hungry for at least the last two chapters, can we please go and find something to eat?’

They went.

QUIT

‘Pizza delivery,’ Sonic said, passing a wonderfully large, flat box to Tails.

The two friends sat down on the edge of the grass and dangled their feet over the edge of the crater below. For a long while there was no sound other than a satisfied munching.

‘Mmmmmm, they got the garlic and extra cheese just right,’ Tails said eventually. He gazed down into the crater. ‘Hard to believe that this was once a Wing Fortress, isn't it?’

‘Yeah,’ Sonic agreed. ‘Still, I guess that means that Robotnik's secret headquarters isn't down there — at least not any more. Or it could be. We've been looking for that place for years now and we still haven't found it.’

Tails nodded. ‘And what's worse, we know Robotnik's there now, plotting yet another nefarious scheme to take everything over. Still, we know that he can't meddle with the computer system again, not now that your duplicate and Psyche, and Iggy of course, are looking after it. I reckon they'll do a really good job.’

‘MmmmMMMmm!’ Sonic confirmed through a mouthful of mozzarella and tomato. ‘Yeah, I reckon we won't be seeing any more of those computer-created badniks running around here. Well, I hope so. I mean, you and me are heroes, but those guys were just too tough. I won't be glad to see them again. I can hardly face playing *Road Warrior Two* ever again, after meeting those guys for real.’

Tails looked worried for a moment. ‘Sonic,’ he said, ‘Robotnik said he'd infected all the computers on Mobius. Do you think he's infected my Game Gear as well? I mean, that's a computer too.’

‘I dunno, little dude,’ Sonic said, licking the last delicious traces of pizza from his fingers. He picked up the sleek black shape of the Game Gear from where it lay on the grass and slotted the *Road Warrior Two* cartridge into it.

‘Hold on a tick, squire, I thought you said you didn't want to play that again, my old road dog and running mate,’ objected Tails.

‘I did say “almost”, dude. Besides, if any cartridge is infected, it'll be this one. And please, do me a favour and lost the strange slang. It doesn't do your coolness any good. Go back to the way you used to speak, okay?’

‘Okay, dude,’ Tails decided. ‘That was a most excellent pizza. Like, totally awesome. Megatastic. Copacetic, even. Thanks, buddy.’

‘That's more like it,’ Sonic grinned, and turned his attention to the Game Gear in his lap. He picked it up, flipped the ‘On’ switch, gasped and stared at the screen. His eyes bulged wide and his body went stiff. A small moan came from somewhere in his throat. The Game Gear slipped from between his paralysed fingers to the grass!

‘Whooooah!’ yelled Tails and disappeared. A moment later, Sonic sat up cheerfully, grinning.

‘Only joking, dude,’ he smiled. ‘Tails? Tails? Where are you, buddy? I can't see you.’

‘I'll give you "only joking", you rotter,’ came a voice from behind him, and then something wet and mushy hit his back as Tails rubbed a big splodge of sticky mud into the hedgehog's smart spikes.

‘My spikes! Bogus! You mess with my spikes, you mess with me!’ Sonic howled and leaped to his feet, but the fox was already hurtling away into the distance, laughing loudly.

Sonic was about to give chase, when he paused. Was everything okay now? Had everything been restored to normal? Could Mobius's resident blue hedgehoggy superhero goof off for long enough to dunk his infuriating furry pal under the nearest waterfall?

‘Yes!’ he shouted at the top of his voice.

Sonic revved his heels and shot off across the clean, green grass of his home. It was business as usual in the Green Hill Zone.

Sonic's pals — even that feisty fox Tails — have been sucked inside computers, and infected with a disintegrator virus. Yes, that egg-crazy weirdo Doctor Robotnik is up to his evil tricks again.

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